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THE  
STAGE:

ITS CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE.



BY

JOHN STYLES, D.D.

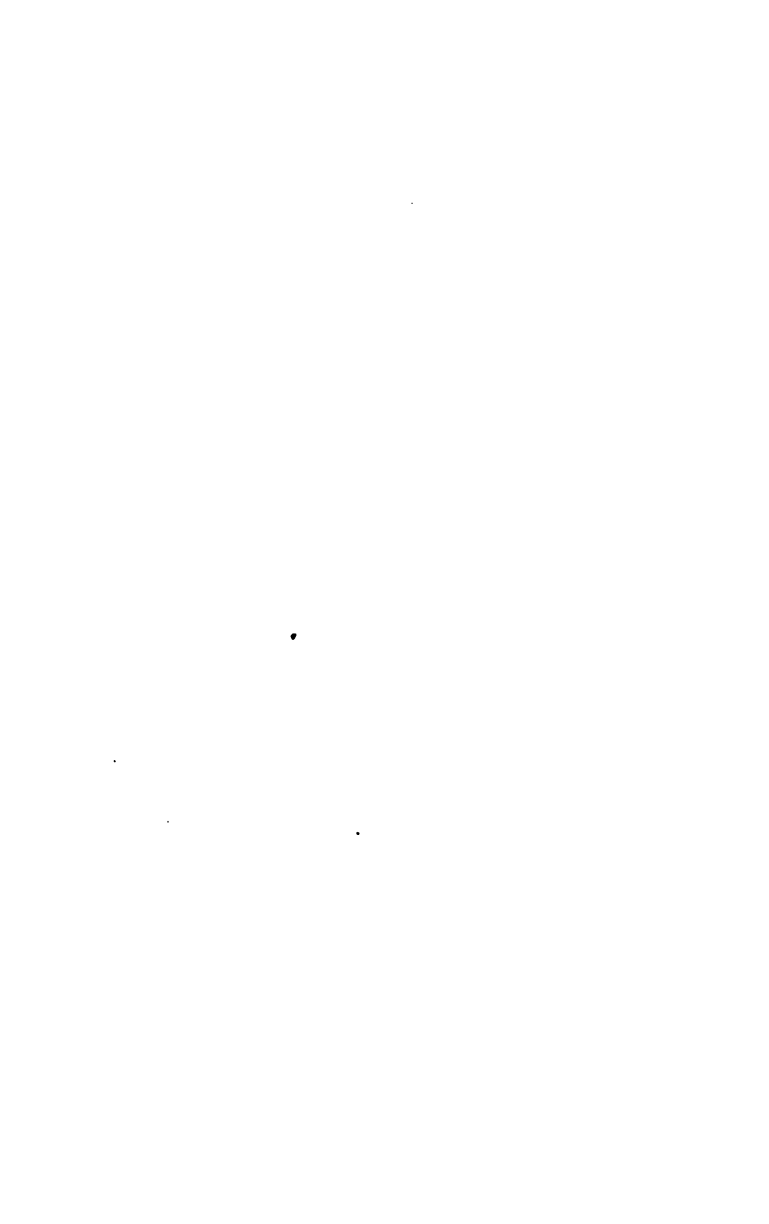
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## P R E F A C E.

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THERE are certain works which, as soon as they appear, not only provoke controversy on account of their subject, but which also excite hostility against their authors. The "Essay on the Stage" happened to be one of this class; but neither sophistry nor calumny arrested its circulation. After a third edition, however, and the lapse of many years, the author lost sight of it; nor did he entertain a thought of republishing it, till he received the suggestion from several quarters, at nearly the same time, accompanied by a most liberal offer, to enable him to carry another edition through the press. This will account for its re-appearance in the present form, and at a considerably reduced price, as compared with that of former impressions. The moral evils of a Theatre, against which the work was originally directed, are, it is to be feared, little abated. And recent circumstances seem to threaten not only their continuance, but their increase.



While other, and able opponents of the Stage have lately appeared, the author of the *Essay*, published thirty years ago, deems it to be his duty to bring out and to polish his long-neglected armour, and once more to take the field. Should any of its readers be struck with the coincidence of sentiment, and argument, and style, and language, between this work and certain discourses, treatises, and tracts, with which they are familiar, its author has only to observe, in his own defence, that the original edition was published in the year 1806, while the works in question bear the date of a much later period.

It was intended to add an appendix to this edition, and a chapter from "*Happiness*," illustrative of the influence of Christianity in alienating the lovers of the Theatre from their once favourite amusement, is referred to in page 90, as inserted in the appendix. It was found, however, expedient not to extend the volume beyond its present limits; the reference, therefore, must be transferred to page 205 of the second volume of "*Happiness*."

*July 7, 1838.*

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# THE STAGE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A BRIEF INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE STAGE.

THE history of the Theatre, from its commencement to the present hour, furnishes a melancholy picture of human folly and degeneracy; and, if it be indeed the mirror of nature, the glass of living manners, or the epitome of man, what is it but a perpetual and practical illustration of his moral ruin—his destitution of every principle that can fit and prepare him for a state of immortal existence beyond the grave? If it be the epitome of man, how hard must be his heart, who, while viewing his species through this medium, does not weep over human nature!

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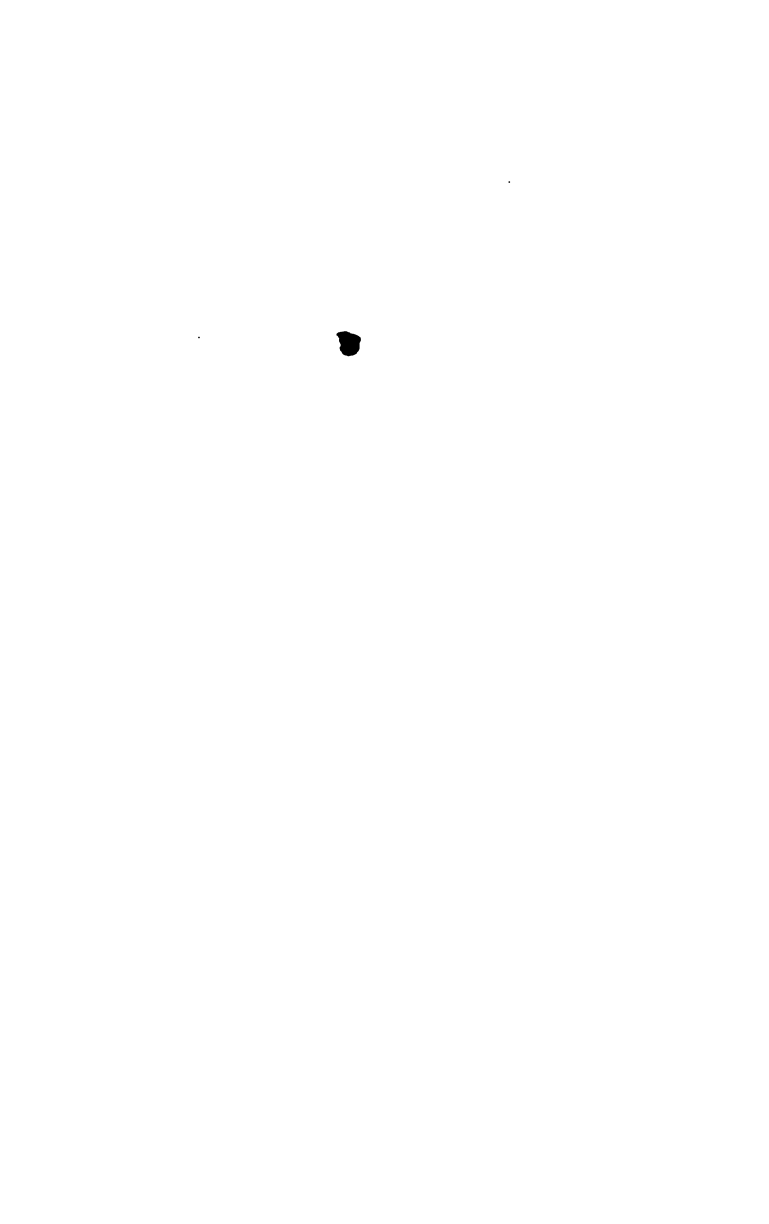
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in those fruits, fair in appearance, "like that which grew in paradise," but which are in reality the produce of that grove which deceived the arch deceiver, when with hatefullest disrelish he

——— " writhed, his jaws

With soot and cinders fill'd."—*Milton*.

Among the most distinguished countries which supported and cherished the Stage, before the diffusion of Christianity, we may reckon Greece and Rome; indeed, in this division, we include the then civilised world. Athens claims the pre-eminence, and was the first city in which was established a regular Theatre. The Athenian Stage may be considered as the parent stock; from thence it branched off as far as Rome, till it became, at last, the elegant and favourite amusement, wherever poetry was admired and luxury enjoyed.

In modern times, Italy, France, Germany, and England, have laboured to attain theatrical eminence; they have each produced favourite

dramatic writers, and each boasts the unrivalled excellence of its performers.

The progress of the Stage, among the ancients and moderns, has been various. By progress, I do not mean its improvement as an art, but its gradual advancement in favour and importance in the estimation of mankind. At Athens it was always cherished with enthusiasm by the people, and a passion for the Theatre became a national characteristic. The Athenians, seized with a theatrical phrensy, almost suspended the common occupations of life, to enjoy the amusements of the Stage. Dramatic writers among them were men of the highest consideration: in their annals, legislators and statesmen appear a sort of inferior beings, when brought in competition with Aristophanes and Menander, with Euripides and Sophocles.

Among the Romans, for a series of years, the dramatic art was little cultivated. At the time of its first introduction, the rigid features of the old Roman character were strongly visible; but as these wore away, the Stage

advanced with rapid progress, extended more widely its influence, and became, as at Athens, the fashionable resort of the idle and the dissolute.

The history of the Stage is much more distinctly marked in modern times, and its steps more easily traced. The Italians have been remarkable for their dramatic taste, for the number of their theatres, and the talents of their performers. The French have devoted themselves with enthusiasm to the pleasures of the Stage; the number of public theatres at Paris is almost incredible. Germany has astonished its neighbours by the multitude, variety, and immorality of its dramatic compositions, the fatal poison of which once spread its baneful influence through all Europe, and even infected the New World.

It cannot indeed be affirmed of the character of the British people, that it is theatrical, or that it is very strongly marked with a theatrical tendency. In a great measure this may be attributed to the spirit of their laws, the vigilance of their government, and, above all, to the

religious principles which are in constant and active operation among them.

Yet great and strenuous efforts have recently been made to invest the stage with a national interest. In the metropolis its establishments have been fearfully multiplied, while the court have lent to it all the sanction of their example, and all the weight of their patronage. Theatres, from the highest grade to the lowest, are scattered through every quarter, from the opera down to the hired rooms, where unwashed artisans repair, to rave in *Lear*, or to whine in *Romeo*; where merchants' clerks, mechanics, and apprentices acquire habits fatal to the interests of sobriety and happiness; where the imaginary prince or hero is soon taught to feel a sort of real dignity, which entirely unfits him for the discharge of those important duties which are inseparable from his condition in life.

In addition to these, we have our private theatricals, and our school exhibitions. The fashionable world must have theatres of its

own ; and inspired with a laudable ambition, they mix with players that they may attain the proud distinction of histrionic fame. Our very children are also instructed to consider the Stage as the principal source of amusement. —Boys and girls must be forced to an unnatural maturity in this hot-bed of the passions : they are not only taken to the Theatre, but at school they must become actors and actresses. To excel in the art of playing is now considered a genteel accomplishment.

Though provincial theatres have in many recent instances proved failing and ruinous speculations to those who embarked their property in them, yet in almost every country town we have a playhouse, which is occasionally visited by some strolling company, who are generally little better than the offal of society, the vagrant apostles of indecency and immorality, whose business it is to spread idleness and dissipation wherever they are permitted to open their commission. Poor, because they disdain the honourable occupations of life

they submit to any meanness, and mix with the very lowest of the people, that they may obtain suffrage and support.

“The mighty monarch, in theatric sack,  
Carries his whole regalia at his back ;  
His royal consort heads the female band,  
And leads the heir apparent in her hand ;  
The pannier'd ass creeps on with conscious pride,  
Bearing a future prince on either side :  
No choice musicians in this troop are found  
To varnish nonsense with the charms of sound ;  
No swords, no daggers, not one poisoned bowl ;  
No light'ning flashes here, no thunders roll ;  
No guards to swell the monarch's train are shown,  
The monarch here must be a host alone ;  
No solemn pomp, no slow processions here,  
No Ammon's entry, and no Juliet's bier.”

With a very little variation, allowing for the change of times and manners, this description is strictly accurate now. Creatures so vulgar, so disreputable, can do little injury to the well-educated part of the community ; they are chiefly dangerous to the industrious poor, who, allured by their buffoonery, relinquish their employments, and injure themselves and families by a frequent and, to them,

expensive attendance on the ridiculous follies of a barn exhibition or a country theatre. It is surprising that men of refinement and education should suffer their taste and judgment to be tortured by the bad acting and worse speaking of provincial players ; and that, without any motive, without even the chance of being pleased, they should lend their example to encourage the lower orders of society to spend their money and their time at the expense of their morals and their happiness.

## CHAPTER II.

### AN INQUIRY INTO THE PRINCIPAL CAUSES WHICH HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE STAGE.

To investigate the causes of things, to answer the why and wherefore, with which curiosity accosts us at every step, is the business of philosophy: but it is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the most comprehensive human intellect to seize the link which binds together cause and effect, principle and result. The subject which this chapter is intended to discuss is happily unembarrassed, and within the ken of moderate intelligence.—The causes which have contributed, in ancient and modern times, to raise the Stage to the eminence which it has ever maintained in all countries where it has been cherished, are to be found—in the dramatic art itself, simply



considered;—in the subjects which have uniformly employed the dramatic pen;—in the character and moral state of the nations, by which the Drama has been welcomed and encouraged.

The dramatic art, simply considered, will account, in some measure, for the influence of the Stage.

That fiction, like a charm, affects the mind, touches the heart, and interests the passions, is a truth which all acknowledge—which all have felt. A tale, whether founded on truth or not, which presents to our view an interesting group of fellow-beings struggling with difficulty, drinking of the cup of sorrow, will draw forth the sympathetic tear. The relation of ludicrous incidents will produce laughter; and the representation of appalling crimes, inflicting a fearful amount of suffering, cannot fail to awaken in the breast the deepest emotions. By a fiction of the imagination we easily persuade ourselves that what we read is actually passing before us;—the illusion is, for the time, complete; ideal presence makes us forget

ourselves ;—we are thrown into a kind of reverie, and feel precisely as if we were eye-witnesses of all that the writer describes.

This is true of fiction in general ; but one peculiar species of it interests the feelings far more exquisitely, and rouses the passions in a much more sensible degree, and that is—fiction assuming a dramatic form. Here, instead of being introduced to characters by description, instead of learning their actions or sufferings from another, we hear them tell their own tale—we are made confidants of their most secret sentiments, and auditors and spectators of their resolutions, their enterprises, and the happy or unhappy events attending them.

It will not then excite surprise, when we consider how wonderfully fiction, in this mode, is calculated to please, that the Stage should have so widely extended its influence ; especially when, superadded to this, we consider the subjects which have generally employed the dramatic pen : and these have always been adapted to man as depraved ; they have flattered the prejudices of the world, and have

often gratified the worst dispositions of the heart.

ANCIENT TRAGEDY is certainly the most unexceptionable part of dramatic history ; but in this a Christian finds enough to make him mourn over the moral degradation of mankind. Pride, ambition, and revenge are prominent features in ancient tragedy ; in this, however, the heathens were consistent with themselves, and inculcated the same lessons at the theatre which they heard in their temples.\* Depraved as they were, they would never have tolerated a theatre which disseminated principles hostile to the established religion ; this is an inconsistency peculiar to Christian countries, and Christian legislatures. It was a part of pagan worship

\* “ Colitur namque et honoratur Minerva in Gymnasiis, Venus in Theatris, Neptunus in circis, Mars in arenis, Mercurius in palæstris, et ideo pro qualitate Auctorum, Cultus est Superstitionum. Alibi est impudicitia, alibi lascivia, alibi intemperantia, alibi insania; ubique Dæmon: imo per singula ludicrorum loca universa dæmonum monstra, præsent enim sedibus suo cultui dedicatis.” Salv. De Gub. Dei. lib. 6.

to deify heroes ; and the Theatre was the stage on which heroic actions were represented and applauded.

The aim of tragedy has been, in every age, to rouse what some have called the greater passions ; that is, those passions which have been the source of almost all the misery which has deluged the world. Against the indulgence of these, the Pagan religions, as it has been remarked, opposed no counteracting influence. It is not therefore at all surprising, that the dramatic art, employed on such subjects, under such circumstances, should rapidly advance the Stage in public favour. But tragedy is chiefly suited to men of literature, and to those who, in understanding, are raised above the common level. It is COMEDY, with wit, humour, ridicule, and licentiousness in her train, that has contributed more than any thing to the wide-spreading influence of a theatrical passion among the inferior classes of society. ANCIENT COMEDY was made up of buffoonery and satire ; it indulged in a liberty scarcely credible, in exposing to ridicule the most illus-

trious and powerful persons in the state:—it not only aimed its shafts at folly and knavery, but actually brought fools and knaves upon the Stage, and described them with so much truth and accuracy, that it was impossible to misunderstand who the persons were that became the objects of poetical censure; and generals, magistrates, government, the very gods, were abandoned to the poet's satirical vein. Thus, when comedy was represented, Envy enjoyed a malignant feast: fell Discontent received a delicious gratification, and

“ Grinn'd horribly a ghastly smile;”

while those who had no spleen to gratify, no hatred to indulge, laughed inconsiderately at a fellow-creature's expense. This sort of comedy was abominably licentious, and was filled with obscenities, “ which denote,” says Rollin, “ excessive libertinism in the spectators, and depravity in the poet.” Formed of such materials, the Stage secured the approbation of a depraved world:—what power could impede its success when it became a pander to the lusts of mankind?

MIDDLE COMEDY differed little from the former, except that the poet no longer dared to satirise the great.

The NEW COMEDY, established by Alexander, was confined to private life, and is the model which our modern writers profess to imitate: this, too, was composed of ridicule and licentiousness. The moderns, in this respect, have followed their predecessors—" *passibus æquis*:" and as their professed object is, and must be, to please, they accommodate themselves to public opinion and to public taste; they govern not the audience, but the audience governs them. This naturally accounts for the progress which the Stage has made, both in former and later times. But there are other causes which have conspired with those already stated to produce this effect, and these are to be found in the character and moral state of those countries by which the Theatre has been encouraged. In this view of the subject, we may denominate the causes of the success and influence of the Stage to have been, Wealth, Luxury, and Idleness.

In all ages we must look for the lovers and supporters of the Theatre in those countries where commerce and wealth have poured in upon the capital the abundance of luxury, and its consequent effeminacy and vice.

It is a remarkable fact, that the Theatre never becomes a general or a favourite amusement in any nation till this is the case. When the sinews of Roman and Athenian virtue were the strongest, the people had neither time nor inclination to regard the diversions of the Stage. Horace, speaking of the Romans in reference to their indifference to the Theatre, assigns for their conduct the following reasons :—

“ Quo sane populus numerabilis utpote parvus,  
Et frugi, castusque verecundusque coibat.”\*

They were few, they were wise, they were religious, and they were modest. While this was their character the Theatre made no pro-

\* The whole passage is as follows :—

“ Tibia non, ut nunc, orichalco vincta, tubæque  
Æmula ; sed tenuis, simplexque foramine pauco

gress among them ; and I am persuaded there is not a nation under heaven of which this

Aspirare, et adesse choris erat utilis, atque  
Nondum spissa nimis complere sedilia flatu ;  
Quo sané populus numerabilis, utpote parvus,  
Et frugi, castusque, verecundusque coibat.  
Postquam cœpit agros extendere victor, et urbem  
Latior amplecti murus, vinoque diurno  
Placari Genius festis impunè diebus ;  
Accesssit numerisque modisque licentia major."

*Hor. Ars Poetica.*

It seems at first the Theatre was little frequented—it was not a national interest. A slender rude pipe was all that was necessary to concur with the chorus, and to fill the rows which were not then too crowded. But afterwards, when conquest enlarged the Roman territory, when it poured into the city the profusions of luxury, and enervated the people, to gratify the sensual appetites without control, became the disgraceful feature of their character who once were noble, simple, brave ; the Theatre—the effeminate amusement which they once disdained—was made the favourite source of pleasure ; and then it was found expedient to satisfy the voracious appetite of a luxurious people, to introduce into its music and poetry greater licentiousness.



sentence is descriptive, where the Stage would be tolerated, or could possibly arrive at celebrity and general patronage. A high degree of national virtue, an attention to the duties of social life, and the necessity of industry, have ever militated against this dangerous and destructive amusement.

At first, so jealous were the Romans of its influence, that it was found impossible to build among them a permanent Theatre; the most magnificent structures, which cost immense sums in the erection, were only permitted to stand for a few days. It was not till the Romans and Athenians were rendered effeminate by wealth and luxury, that they afforded countenance and support to the Stage.

The Roman empire was rapidly on the decline when Nero himself became a buffoon and a comedian; and while the Grecians were relaxing the nerves of their strength by these vain and luxurious amusements, they were gradually unfolding the gates of their city to Philip of Macedon. Let glory intoxicate and ease effeminate a people—let wealth relax industry and

furnish the refinements of luxury—let religion be neglected and its sanctions despised—and the Theatre will rise to the stature of a Colossus, and a nation will first fall down and worship the idol of its creation, and then become the victim of its own idolatry.

These assertions require not arguments to enforce them ; standing on the base of truth, I point to the column of history ; there I see national virtue, sobriety, industry, manly vigour, strongly contending every inch of ground with the abettors of the Stage ; till, at last, overpowered by wealth and its concomitant evils, they are constrained to yield.

A redoubtable champion of the Stage has the hardihood to maintain the converse of these propositions. He declares, that “ an attack on the Theatre is alike hostile to public instruction, to public morality, and to public happiness. The fathers of the Christian church, by conspiring to suppress the Theatres of Greece and Rome, rebarbarised Europe, and condemned the victims of their mischievous

tuition to a millennium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe."

The first assertion, that the Theatre is the school of public instruction, morality, and happiness, may easily be established or refuted, by the annals of theatrical history.

The Theatre of Greece, this writer himself denounces as the most licentious of any upon record. In confirmation of his opinion, he refers to the *Ecclesiazousai* of Aristophanes; I suppose, to convince his readers of the importance of the Grecian Stage to public instruction, public morality, and public happiness. Let the greater part of the dramatic writings of Greece and Rome be examined, and we shall see what kind of instruction they conveyed; and let the effect of a passion for scenic representations be traced in the history of the commonwealths where it was indulged, and we shall find the reverse of this author's assertion to be true. The DEFENDERS of the Stage have been the most dangerous enemies of public morals and happiness. The lessons taught

by Aristophanes on the Grecian Stage absolutely destroyed all sense of public virtue and decency; and it has been justly observed by Mrs. More, "That the profane and impure Aristophanes was almost adored, while the virtue of Socrates not only procured him a violent death, but the poet, by making the philosopher contemptible to the populace, paved the way to his unjust sentence by the judges. Nay, perhaps the delight which the Athenians took in the impious and offensively loose wit of this dramatic poet, rendered them more deaf to the voice of that virtue which was taught by Plato, and of that liberty in which they had once gloried, and which Demosthenes continued to thunder in their unheeding ears. Their rage for sensual pleasure rendered them a fit object for the projects of Philip, and a ready prey to the attacks of Alexander. In lamenting, however, the corruptions of the Theatre in Athens, justice compels us to acknowledge that her immortal tragic poets, by their chaste and manly compositions, furnish a noble exception.

In no country have decency and purity, and—to the disgrace of Christian countries let it be added—have morality, and even piety, been so generally prevalent in any theatrical compositions as in what

“‘ Her lofty, grave tragedians taught  
In chorus or Iambic : teachers best  
Of moral prudence.’

“ Yet in paying a just and warm tribute to the moral excellences of these sublime dramatists, is not an answer provided to that long agitated question, whether the Stage can be indeed made a school of morals ? No question had ever a fairer chance for decision than was here afforded. If it be allowed that there never was a more profligate city than Athens ; if it be equally indisputable that never country possessed more unexceptionable dramatic poets than Eschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides ; if the same city thus at once produced the best physicians and the worst patients, what is the result ? Do the Athenian annals record that

any class or condition of citizens were actually reformed by constantly frequenting—we had almost said, constantly living in the Theatre?”

If reforming the world has been the object of the Theatre, no institution has been so singularly unfortunate. This “Academy, where grown persons assemble to study propriety,”\* has generally taught them a very different lesson.

This writer acknowledges, that there are some cases in which the Theatre teaches the grossest and most dangerous immorality; and it is to be observed, that his standard of morals is not very refined or exalted. Those virtues which are exclusively Christian, he abandons as little weaknesses. Yet, according to his very lax code of morals, the Theatre is not always the school in which morality is taught. He confesses that some plays irradiate the suicide of public character; and, I suppose, he will acknowledge, that “Douglas,” and several others, irradiate the suicide of private character.

\* Annual Review.

But is this, he asks, a formidable evil? Not perhaps to those who believe that death is an eternal sleep. It is also conceded, that some comedies soften down adultery; but then this is the excuse furnished for the comic poet. "At the time these plays were written, it had not been discovered in how high a degree domestic happiness and social order depend on conjugal fidelity." But WHY was it not then discovered? and if it is now discovered, why is it that those plays on the English Stage which soften down adultery are the most popular? And may I not ask, do not these concessions give up the point? What are we to think of a school of morals in which the pupils are as often likely to learn vice as virtue? As often did I say? If this writer will condescend to examine minutely the ancient and the modern Drama, he will find that there are very few plays which teach a pure morality, and that the influence of every Theatre which has hitherto existed has given a preponderance to the other scale; if he does not know this,

he ought to have known it before he had volunteered his services in its defence. If the Theatre were what this critic would insinuate it to be, every criminal, every licentious play must necessarily be excluded from it; instead of which it furnishes no barrier whatever against performances the most impure. It is notorious that its tendency is directly on the side of vice; and this tendency it is always necessary to check with a strong hand. If the audience will endure licentiousness, the players are ever ready to furnish it; nay, to overstock the market. Yet, "to attack the Stage is alike hostile to public instruction, to public morality, and public happiness!"

But we are informed, "That by conspiring to suppress the Theatres of Greece and Rome, the Christian Fathers rebarbarized Europe, and condemned the victims of their mischievous tuition to a millennium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe."

Here are no less than three gross violations of the truth of history. The Theatre is exhibited as the depository of science, the palla-



dium of liberty, and the source of consolation and joy. The Fathers are accused of rebarbarizing Europe, and it is said that they accomplished this event by suppressing the Theatres of Greece and Rome.

By attempting to suppress the Theatre, we are first assured, that the Christian Fathers introduced a millennium of ignorance. The Theatre then must have been the depository of science, and it must have been exclusively so. But was it indeed the only light which shone in this dark world? where then was the grove of Plato, and the Lyceum of Aristotle? where the great luminaries of the heathen world? where the oracles of heaven, and the Sun of righteousness? But what are these when compared with the theatres of Greece and Rome? these indeed continued to shine in all their glory; but in the estimation of this writer it was a twinkling glory, little to be preferred to the blackness of total night. The Theatre was opposed, and a millennium of ignorance stole upon the world. But if we may judge of the past by the present, this sounding gasconade will eva-

porate. What serious loss should we sustain if all the popular and acted literature of the English drama were annihilated? Should we be rebarbarized? If there were not a play in our language, what mighty injury would be the consequence? To the cause of morality and religion, with few exceptions, it would be a clear advantage; and as for useful knowledge, it never depended upon a Theatre, nor has ever been beneficially connected with it; and of most modern plays, correct taste and mental dignity are ashamed. The Theatre of our day seems destined to give immortality to Mother Goose, Tom Thumb, and Jack the Giant-killer :\*—what was formerly the sport of children is now the amusement of men, and the time when Gog and Magog are to revisit the earth seems to be arrived.†

But we are informed, that a millennium of

\* The writer knows not the varieties of the species, and therefore cannot describe by name the successors and descendants of these worthies.

† The Mohammedans believe, that when Gog and Magog are to come, the race of men will have dwindled to such littleness, that a shoe of one of the present

vassalage was another consequence of the hostility of the Fathers to the Theatres of Greece and Rome. The Theatres then must have been the palladium of liberty. But the fact is, what this writer would exhibit as the palladium of liberty was its grave; at least this was undoubtedly true of the Athenian Stage. Pericles took this effectual method to supplant his competitors in the Athenian state; and to secure his own influence, he established a fund from the public money to support the Theatre, and to pay for the admission of the populace, making it a capital crime to divert this fund to any other service. "He scrupled not," says Mrs. More, "in order to secure their attachment to his person and government, by thus buying them with their own money, effectually to promote their natural levity and idleness, and to corrupt their morals." Once inspire a people

generation will serve them for a house. If this prophecy be typical of the intellectual diminution of the species, judging from the present state of the Theatre, we must believe that Gog and Magog may soon be expected.

with a rage for amusement and shows, and they will soon yield up their liberty, and become the vassals of any tyrant, who will thus encircle them with the silken cords of voluptuousness and pleasure. With regard to the happiness which is diffused by a Theatre, it is imaginary, uncertain, and evanescent! The fever of the passions may produce a delirium of pleasure ; but it is only a delirium ; and when a man awakes to sober reflection, the phantoms of a theatre will not charm away the evil spirit. That man is indeed a pitiable object, whose happiness depends on the existence of a Theatre. This, however, is matter of mere opinion ; and if an individual chooses to say that he cannot be happy without the amusements of the Stage, I will not dispute with him ; but I maintain, that if the Theatre were abolished, and there were no other existing cause of woe, the world need not, and would not be miserable. If the Christian Fathers, therefore, had actually abolished the Theatres of Greece and Rome, Europe, by that means, would not have been rebarbarized. It was not the destruction of the Theatre that in-

roduced the millennium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe.

But their dark and dismal empire must be ascribed to other persons and other causes. The fathers of the Christian church are guiltless here, and the Theatre might have perished without the extinction of one ray of intellectual light or civil liberty, had not the demons of superstition and priestly power spread over the western continent their raven wing, overwhelming the earth with a darkness more horrible than that of Egypt. The Fathers of the church were the enlightened friends of freedom and of man; they forged no chains for the human mind, but they loosed the bands of superstition. They were the apostles of a pure morality. They attempted to allay the fever of the passions, and to restore man to the dignity of reason. They indeed attacked the Stage, because it was hostile to the best interests of humanity; and in this conduct it will afterwards appear this author justifies them: he acknowledges that Collier and the Abbé Clement “aped their anger without their provoca-

tion ;" yet provoked as they were by immorality and licentiousness, their attempts to suppress those evils condemned the victims of their mischievous tuition to a millennium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe. Not to notice this palpable inconsistency, we may inquire, Is this charge applicable to them in any degree? Did they rebarbarize Europe? Surely not. They had their peculiarities and their infirmities, for they were men. And had the subsequent ministers of the Gospel displayed their faith and purity, the Theatre must have been abolished; and the rays of civilisation and science would have shed a Divine lustre over the habitable earth. The reign of barbarism commenced with the Papal power, the domination of ecclesiastical over civil government; the establishment of the Pontificate at Rome, with the doctrines of the Holy See, were the sole causes which produced the millennium of darkness, which is here ascribed to the attempts of the Christian fathers to abolish the Theatres of Greece and Rome.

May we not be permitted to ask, If the de-

struction of a taste for scenic representations among the pupils of the Christian Fathers overspread Europe with intellectual and moral darkness, how was it that, when the Theatre became a favourite amusement in Catholic countries, that it did not pour forth upon them the light of day? To the Reformation of Luther we are to ascribe the revival of learning in Europe. That stupendous event, like a tempest, purified the moral atmosphere from the noxious vapours of superstition and ignorance; burst asunder the chains of vassalage, and introduced new heavens and a new earth. Beholding these astonishing—these happy changes, and remembering the high character which this advocate of the Stage has given the Theatre, we naturally expect that it had some interesting and important share in chasing away the darkness of the night. The Theatre certainly was not inactive: it was extremely zealous; but it was to promote the cause of ignorance, vassalage, and woe—it was to rivet the chains which Popery had forged; it was, if possible, to cover with contempt the Reformation, with

its heroic apostle, the immortal Luther. It was not, therefore, to the Stage Europe was indebted for her happy change of circumstances in the sixteenth century ; but, on the contrary, that school of instruction, of morality, and happiness, exerted all its powers, that darkness and misery might be perpetual.



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## CHAPTER III.

### THE STAGE CONSIDERED AS AN AMUSEMENT ONLY.

BEFORE I enter upon the subject of the moral character of the Stage, and its influence on the happiness of its votaries, it may be necessary to devote a few pages to a consideration of it as an amusement only; because many of its advocates disclaim the idea of its being a teacher, and plead for it solely on this ground. Though I am persuaded that the sentiments which it promulgates are highly injurious to the interests of virtue, yet I would inquire, independently of this, whether the Theatre can be viewed as an amusement deserving the patronage and support of Christians? I will therefore divest it of its character as an instructor, and consider it only in the light in which Shaftsbury pleaded for it, and Rousseau defended it. Shaftsbury declares,

“That the Theatre was intended merely for recreation, and that if it have any tendency to improve, the improvement extends only to the art of the poet, and the refinement of taste.” Rousseau, in his *System of Education*, has a similar remark:—“I carry *Emilius* to the Theatre,” says he, “not to study morals, but taste; for there it particularly displays itself to those who are capable of reflection. You have nothing to do, I will tell him, with morality here; this is not the place in which to learn it: the Stage was not erected for the promulgation of truth, but to flatter and amuse.”

With respect to the improvement of taste, and the poetic art, by the drama, whatever the ancients might urge on this head, the moderns surely have nothing to claim. Garrick in vain attempted to discipline the taste of an English audience; he at last relinquished the task in despair, and was heard to say, “That if the public required him to get up for the Stage the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, he would do it.” I conceive there is even less to be said in favour of the modern drama as a standard of taste, than

can be advanced in its defence as a school of morals; and in both, it is a severe reflection on our literature and virtue.

As an amusement only, I think the Stage cannot be defended: strip it of its pretensions to taste and to moral instruction, and it loses every thing. The question naturally presents itself here—What is the nature and end of amusement? And when this is answered, another immediately follows:—Does the Theatre correspond with this idea; is it calculated to answer this end?

Amusement is recreation, and is intended to relieve the mind from severe attention, or to recruit the animal spirits, by an agreeable suspension of mental or bodily labour. Man is formed for exertion; his circumstances in general require activity: but weariness and fatigue are the consequence of a proper and becoming attention to the business and duties of life. The mind must sometimes relax—the body cannot always exert its energies. But it is injurious to the intellectual powers, and to the animal constitution, to suffer an immediate

transition from busy employment to perfect idleness. We naturally ask for recreation something that will assist the mind pleasingly to unbend ; that will enliven and exhilarate the spirits, and thus prepare us for the return of occupation, and qualify us to enter upon it with new energy.

It is the quality of the amusement, and the manner in which it is pursued, that constitute it good or bad. There is an evident distinction to be made between different kinds of amusements ; some are innocent, and therefore lawful in themselves ; they are only injurious when misplaced—when they intrench too much upon our time, and engage a disproportionate share of our attention ; others are equivocal ; and a third class are decidedly evil.

I have said that recreation is necessary. Every person, even the meanest in society, ought to enjoy the privilege of some leisure time ; and the manner of employing this is usually a fair and certain test of character. Here, the individual is his own master ; his amusements are completely the objects of his

choice ; and we may at once ascertain the nature of his principles by the quality of his pleasures.\*

Among the amusements which deserve to be reprobated by every friend of virtue, we reckon those which may be harmless in their nature, but which are made to infringe u

\* " If as a Christian," says a pious writer, " I have a tender concern for the happiness of a friend, I must observe him in his leisure hours. It will give me pleasure to find him then a loitering trifler ; nor will it relieve me to discover that in such seasons he is constantly engaged in the pursuit of idle speculations in the gratification and improvement of an elegant taste. In such a case, I must remind him, that there are more serious concerns ; I must counsel him to turn to pleasures more solid and sublime. But what if my friend is seized with the madness of the times, hurried into the whirlpool of fashionable amusements. Ah, now the chaos of his darkened mind is agitated, now there is no access for sober reflection ! I stand afar off, with the feelings of one who beholds from the shore, incapable of affording relief, a disasting shipwreck ; only I remember that the things which are impossible with men are possible with God."

sacred time ; and those which, in their principle and tendency, are opposed to the genius and spirit of the Gospel.

It is necessary that our amusements should be suited to our pursuits. The student and the man of science should recreate himself with something adapted to the nature of his employment, and which at the same time conduces to his health. Exercise, light reading, social converse, are all sources of pleasure and recreation to the student ; and if he be not fastidious, they are all he requires. The man of business, after his mind has been wearied by its cares, and his body fatigued, if he have a rational taste, will retire into the bosom of his family ; or, if he be not blest with the endearments of domestic life, he will certainly recreate and enliven his spirits by innocent diversion ; he will studiously avoid every thing which would violently agitate his frame, which demands the labour of close attention, and which cannot be accomplished but by a waste of time, incompatible with any active employment. Amusement should invigorate, and not

exhaust the powers ; it should spread a sweet serenity over the mind, and should be enjoyed at proper seasons. Midnight is no time for recreation to a rational being, who lives for any other purpose than to destroy his constitution, and kill time. The amusements of society should never encroach upon its duties, or they defeat their object, and become injurious.

It must be perceived that I have hitherto spoken of the amusements of those who are " useful to their kind ;" I have not considered the miserable expedients of fops and fools, by which they endeavour to relieve themselves from the burden of idleness, and the listlessness of having no one important object to engage their attention ; and who contrive one folly after another, in quick succession, to enable them to pass through life without reflection, and with as little benefit as possible to themselves or others. I pity the contemptible creature who has nothing to do but to get rid of his time ; to talk of amusing such a being is a misapplication of words. Amusement is his business ; and who will envy him his drudgery,

or his toil? He inverts the order of nature; he seems to be happy, but he betrays himself; it is easy to discern, through his apparent gaiety, his real wretchedness :—'tis

“ A face of pleasure, but a heart of pain.”

I think it would be a service which all moral writers would render to mankind, were they to strike off these tiny beings, these animalculæ, from the list of rational existence; and therefore I wish it to be distinctly understood, that I consider their example and their claims lighter than air :—they have mistaken the great end of living; and their conduct is one continued aberration from nature, reason, and happiness.

But to return. If the nature and end of amusement be to recreate the mind, and to recruit the strength of those who are performing the duties of life; and if those things only are proper for amusement which have this tendency; it surely will never be urged, in favour of the Theatre, that it is a suitable recreation for persons of this description and character.

The mind is as much employed, the atten-



tion is as strongly seized at the Theatre, as in any of the engagements of active life. Fatigue and weariness are felt as much on quitting the Playhouse as on leaving the study, the counting-house, or the exchange. There is nothing that exhausts us more than the fever of the passions. The tempest of the soul is succeeded by distressing lassitude. After it subsides, we seem deprived of strength; our energies are gone; and it is some time before the mind recovers its former tone. Now it is notorious, that the Theatre rouses the passions, and agitates the soul. If we attend at all to what is passing before us, we are deeply interested; the real occurrences of life, which involve in them the happiness or misery of individuals, could not impress us more, nor would they so much. One moment we swell with ambition, and the next are fired with revenge; now we tremble with fear, then burn with desire; sometimes we chill with horror, and anon in sympathy, with the imaginary child of woe—

“ Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum.”

The Theatre, then, in this view, cannot reasonably be considered as an amusement. Unless it assume a higher character—unless it answer some moral purpose, it would be preposterous to represent it as a recreation for intelligent minds, who wish to unbend and relax, that they may attend with more ability and pleasure to the great object for which they are bound to live.

The hours, the precious hours, too, which are consumed at the Theatre, is another argument against it of great moment. To waste four hours, some of which at least should be otherwise employed by creatures who are accountable to the Supreme Being, and who owe him gratitude and adoration, is defeating the very purpose of amusement : it makes pleasure intrude beyond the precincts of duty : it destroys the peace and order of every well-regulated family, and absolutely unfits the mind for performing any thing with vigour through the whole succeeding day. And in addition to these considerations, it will not be claimed for theatrical amusement, that it conduces to health.

The rosy goddess dwells not in the crowded Theatre, but pale sickness and wan disease are there seated on an ebon throne, scattering around, with a lavish hand, the fatal seeds of death.

These are things so obviously striking, that every reader must acknowledge their force. If persons visit the Theatre, without being at all interested in what is passing, their apathy and idiocy are features of the clan to which they belong; and to reason with those who are incapable of thought, would betray folly almost as revolting as their own. I cannot conclude this division of my subject more appropriately than by furnishing one of the best general rules to guide us in our choice of amusements, that I have ever read;—it is a passage from “A World without Souls.” Let a Christian read this, and yield himself to the amusements of the Theatre if he can.

“If there is something wholesome in them which almost refuses corruption; if the advantages they produce balance their mischief, if corrupted; if, by scattering their oils around,

they contribute to smooth without poisoning the waves of life ; if their direct or chance expense does not break in upon that treasury which every man keeps for his neighbour ; if they are not so closely allied to the amusements of the bad as to break down the wall of partition between us and them ; if they have no tendency to wean society from more profitable employments ; if, lastly, they do not encroach upon that handful of time bestowed upon man to do the business of eternity :—if all this be true of any of them, I will say of him who uses them, he may be a Christian, and a good Christian ; but I shall still think him the most distinguished Christian who uses them the least. The good, like the great man, (why, alas ! are not the terms convertible ?) will ever seek his pleasures in the field of his duties ; and, though he suffers mere amusement, will seldom court it.” To this general rule, I may add a cautionary sentence to those Christian families who are continually endeavouring to accommodate their principles to the spirit of the world, by pleading for the innocence of those amusements

which the wise and the pious have hitherto united to condemn.

“It is always an evil symptom, when professedly religious people are contending for a little more of this amusement, and pleading for a little extension of that gratification, and fighting to hedge in a little more territory to their pleasure-ground : little do they think that they are thus exhibiting a kind of evidence against themselves, that they are not yet renewed in the spirit of their mind.”\*

\* Mrs. More's *Strictures*, &c.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE IMMORAL AND ANTICHRISTIAN TENDENCY OF THE STAGE.

FROM the last chapter it must appear evident, that the Stage cannot be neutralised into a mere amusement,—it must have some influence in the formation of character ; and it becomes us now to inquire of what kind that influence is. If it be an amusing instructor of moral wisdom, then objections that might forcibly be urged against it as a diversion only, must fall to the ground ; but if the tendency of the Theatre be dangerous to virtue and religion, these objections become irresistible. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” is equally applicable to things as to men ; PRACTICAL UTILITY is an argument which refutes a thousand objections against a theory or a system. If it can be proved that great and important advantages result from any thing, the propriety and expediency of which are called in question, nothing

but the most incorrigible obstinacy will persevere in hostility, and say, "Hurl it to the ground."

But some things may be presented to our view in such a questionable shape, that the subtle casuist, availing himself of the ambiguity in which he has involved them, will confound truth, and perplex the clearest reasoning.— It is not always easy to decide the simple question of utility, though that decision might set an agitated subject for ever at rest.

The effects of the Stage on MORALS and on HAPPINESS, if clearly pointed out, would, in my opinion, go far towards establishing the conclusion, that it is an evil of portentous magnitude, which Christians are under the strongest obligations to avoid and to reprobate. But even on this ground the drama is not destitute of advocates; there are not wanting theatrical enthusiasts, who, with an overflowing zeal for the cause, boldly aver, that the Stage has been a public blessing to the world, "That it must float on public favour, the mirror of a nation's virtue, and the enlightened and polished school of a free people."\*

\* Another acquaints us, that the Stage is a school

But not one of its champions has advanced fairly and openly into the field; they have all

for virtue :—his information is unquestionable, for its scholars are practising in the lobby.

Great stress has been laid, by the advocates of the Stage, on the purifying efficacy of its satire. How little this argument avails, will appear from the following observations of a much lamented friend, now no more, which I transcribe with melancholy pleasure from a work which he conducted for several years with singular ability :—

“Considering satire more favourably, not as the effusion of personal animosity, but as an attempt to expose vice and folly to indignation and contempt, we are of opinion that it is rarely innocent. The exercise of ridicule implies in the satirist, and excites in his reader, a contemptuous feeling, composed of pride and mirth; that of invective, implies and excites an indignant feeling, composed of pride and malice; and however faint and harmless these feelings may appear in single instances, and on just occasions, the character which they induce on the mind, by frequent recurrence, is neither dubious nor amiable. The mob which has been assisting with stones and mud at an exhibition on the pillory, returns, perhaps, with strong feelings of contempt or indignation against some particular crime;



intrenched themselves in some of those plausible representations with which the dramatic art,

but we cannot applaud such an attack even on vice, nor recommend such an employment as a salutary discipline for the heart. If the innocence of satire be doubtful, we are still more inclined to question its efficacy. We will not affirm, that it has been wholly useless in combating the follies and delusions of mankind;—it may have abated some nuisances in literature, and reformed some offences against taste; it may have rectified some little absurdities in dress or manner, and assisted in demolishing the reverence for monks, the spirit of knight errantry, and the devotion to a corrupt and despotic priesthood. These absurdities were easy to overcome; to expose was to defeat them; they had no hold on the passions and appetites; they maintained their power injuriously to the public interest, under a temporary cover of ignorance, and were vanquished by a gleam of light; they were not the canker at the heart of a flower, but the caterpillar on its leaf. The follies of men are, however, so volatile and fantastic—they are so ready to vanish spontaneously, and re-appear in new shapes, that the touch of satire is scarcely needed to anticipate their destiny; it is unable to extinguish their essential being, and can only pretend to hasten that metamorphose, which might otherwise have waited a little for the lapse of time. But the vices derive

abstractedly considered, has furnished them. The Stage cannot boast one literary advocate

their influence, not from novelty or accident, but from the most powerful and permanent propensities of human nature ; they maintain it, not by favour of ignorance, but against convictions of interest, and sentiments of obligation. The vice which has resisted them all is invulnerable to the wrath or ridicule of a satirist ; he cannot make it appear more odious than it is known to be, by any poetical association of circumstances or aggravation of phrase ; nor propose any motive to virtue which conscience or policy has not often suggested in vain.

“ Should it, however, be admitted, that the vicious are not accustomed to surrender their favourite gratifications at the summons of a speculative satirist ; yet personal satire may still be supposed to have its use, to deter the delinquent from repeating, or the tempted from committing, a crime, by the prospect of exposure and public scorn. To condemn the vicious may be effectual, where it is useless to condemn vice. The experiment has been tried ; the early comic writers of Athens, as long as they were endured—

*‘ Si quis erat dignus describi, quod malus, aut fur,  
Quod mœchus foret, aut sicarius, aut alioqui  
Famosus, multa cum libertate notabant. ’*

“ We do not hear that the ridicule of Aristophanes

who has viewed it impartially—who has taken its just features and traced its MORAL influence. There is not one, in fact, who has defended the Stage AS IT IS: a creature of their own imagination, a Stage which never had exist-

reformed or banished any culprit, or corrected the licentiousness of the Athenian manners; but we do remember that a venerable and innocent sage was the victim of this hopeful censurate. The satire of the middle comedy has been revived in our own times; we do not hear that Samuel Foote could claim the credit of reducing the number of 'Mother Coles;' but we doubt not that, in blackening the character of Whitfield, he stimulated the spirit of bigotry and persecution which raged against him amongst vulgar minds, and confirmed multitudes in their derision of religious truth, their habits of vice, and their heedlessness of eternity.

“In fine, one question may perhaps be equivalent to fifty arguments:—What profligate has satire ever reclaimed to virtue, and what crime has it ever banished from society? If one instance could be produced, we must again inquire, before we acknowledge its efficacy as an instrument of reform, Has it altered the character, or only changed the vice? Has it purged a constitutional taint, or only obliterated a particular symptom?”

ence but in the regions of fancy, many have indeed fervidly and successfully eulogised. They have given just such a view of the Theatre as Condorcet and Godwin, in their wild and beautiful theories, have given of man, which possess every thing to make them charming—but truth.

We are not to reason, *à priori*, on what delightful effect a perfect Theatre—"a baseless fabric of a vision"—might produce; we have nothing to do with those who would lead us on to the utmost verge of possibility, who refer us to some distant golden age when this leopard will change his spots. The great question is, What has the real—not an imaginary—Theatre actually produced? And the point which is now before us, is, not what talents have been called forth by the drama—what improvement literature and taste have derived from it; but what has been its influence on the MORALS and the HAPPINESS of mankind?

Were I to allow the Stage all that its warmest friends are disposed to claim on the score of literary refinement and taste, yet I am by no means persuaded that these effects might not

have been otherwise produced. It is, strictly speaking, but one branch of literature that has received peculiar advantage from the Theatre; and perhaps I may be accused of Vandalism, when I declare, that if literary taste and the fine arts connected with the Stage must be purchased at the enormous expense of morality and religion, it is our duty to preserve these, let the fate of polite literature be what it may.\*

I fear no contradiction when I assert, that since the promulgation and establishment of Christianity, the Stage has never been, for three months together, what a wise legislature, concerned for the morals of the people, and consequently for their felicity, could consistently tolerate; and, from what is known of human nature, there is no probability of a change. Indeed, from the nature and circumstances of a Theatre, which will afterwards be considered, a RADICAL improvement in this re-

\* The written Drama is not necessarily connected with the Theatre. Shakspeare is injured and debased by the association. It is in the study that we feel his power; on the Stage the magic charm of his genius is dissolved.

spect is impossible. It is fair, in arguing against what we disapprove, to state those facts which make the scale of reason preponderate in our favour.

As a prosperous Stage is one of the effects of luxury, idleness, and dissipation, it is marked with the features of its family; and to render their progress more alarming, it lends to its progenitors all its power. Aided by the Theatre, these destroyers of virtue become more and more successful in their work. In the Stage they have a powerful auxiliary, more particularly useful in enlarging the boundaries of their influence. The effeminacy of luxury, its idleness and its vice, are at first confined to the wealthy and the great; and while the body of the people remain uncontaminated, the cause of virtue, comparatively speaking, suffers little. The fruitful parent of vice and misery is that which relaxes the nerve of industry—which transforms the citizen, the tradesman, and the mechanic, into the man of fashion, the loungeur, and the libertine. While dissipation moves in the narrow circle of the exalted few, it is but an excrescence on the body—it affects not the

constitution ; but when it widens its sphere, and embraces alike the poor and the rich, with the intermediate space between, it is as if the whole mass of blood were infected with deadly poison. And that channel, through which the higher classes of society pour forth their contaminating influence upon the humbler walks of life, whatever it be, is, perhaps, of all the evils that ever entered the world, the most baneful and destructive ; and I feel no hesitation in declaring, that to this evil the Stage has contributed a fearful amount.\*

\* On this subject, the modern Andrew Marvel has written with great point, and his reasoning is most conclusive. In his "Aphoristic Observations, proposed to the consideration of the public, respecting the propriety of admitting Theatrical Amusements into country manufacturing towns," the Rev. Rowland Hill, speaking of comedies, observes,—“Such plays as only exhibit the low tricks and artful designs of different characters, corrupt the native simplicity of the people. The dress and style of these interludes are equally as corrupting ; to this may be added, the frequent and extreme profanation of the sacred name of God.” Mr. Hill then remarks on the lewd gestures and expressions which

One fair way of judging whether a Theatre be beneficial or injurious, is to suppose that it

disgrace comic actors, and exclaims, "How can any persons, especially females, join to support a set of strangers, who demand from them a payment, while they insult their modesty by sentiments and actions the most vulgar and obscene?" These exhibitions, though countenanced by the rich, are principally *supported* by the poor at large; and we too well know what sort of *low jokes* please people of their education best. For such exhibitions as these, they are the most willing to part with their money; and no wonder that they do it eagerly, while they have thereby an opportunity of being a sort of companions to their superiors; too many of whom, by joining in the wretched laugh, thereby give sufficient proof that, though better educated, how little they are the better for their education. I will inquire, If tragic performances are proper exhibitions for a country town? The mind of man being naturally aspiring, all *high* and romantic ideas feed that disposition; and the common people are taught thereby such aspiring and ambitious sentiments as God in his providence never designed for their pursuit. By such sentiments, therefore, the minds of these people, contrary to their proper callings, are naturally *unhinged* from following those pursuits of industry and



has its full influence, and produces all the effect which its principles are calculated to produce,

frugality which ought to be the main business of their lives. In short, by *comedies*, they are instructed to be *dissipated and profane*; by *tragedies*, they are taught to be *lofty and proud*. Now, what must be the effect of these things? And, first, upon our manufacturers:—That our manufacturers may meet with a proper encouragement for their industry, are we not under the cruel necessity to give them but low wages for a deal of labour, in order to procure an extensive sale for the commodity? And, with these low wages, if they follow the proper dictates of the economy of human life, they will have their wives and families to support. Is it not, then, next to *robbery* to suffer these poor people to be tempted to part with the pittance they so hardly earn for themselves and families—to spend it upon a set of strangers, who corrupt their minds, and leave them in beggary to lament their folly? And while these temptations are permitted, can the evil consequences possibly be avoided? Next, let the situation of such as are in servitude be properly attended to. It is their business to look upon their masters' and mistresses' concerns as their own; on this account they ought to stay at home and mind their business, and for this their employers should properly reward them. *Good servants* should learn to keep within doors, and,

without any counteracting influence from Christianity. I will suppose a city, where the

when tempted to go abroad, no wonder if they soon commence bad ones. Servants and manufacturers being thus equally corrupted, what must be the consequence? That which ruins a good servant destroys our domestic happiness, as it is to them we are indebted for much of our enjoyments in private life; and as all our strength and wealth consists in the industry and frugality of the poor at large, to corrupt them is to weaken the very sinews of the nation. A spirit of dissipation among our manufactories cannot but ultimately tend to the destruction of our commerce. But what are the grosser consequences of these things? Every single sixpence that can be procured must run in this miserable channel; and, when at a loss for more, the pawnbroker is to supply them; he next strips them of their clothing: thus doubly spoiled, how deplorable is the situation of these poor thoughtless creatures! Let the lovers of good order and sobriety pass the doors where these scenes are exhibited, there they will meet in plenty *bankrupts* of this description mixing with profligates of a still lower cast, each of them waiting to catch all they can, *gratis*. Lewd women join the mob; these revel together without control. From such a mart of wickedness they retire, fitted for every crime that human nature, in its foulest state, can pos-

natural depravity of the human heart go with no more than common luxuriance, w

sibly commit. To complete the evils of these ex- ble performances, a wretched group of children called from each cottage, or garret, to bring up rear. They are taught to sin betimes, and soon commence as hardened and as shameless as their tutors in iniquity. The very first calamitous day sinks all poor heedless creatures into a situation in which must either starve, or receive parochial support ; for this every industrious inhabitant must equally taxed. Now, is it just in these lovers of dissipation to give countenance to such evils, which, after their industrious neighbours must pay for as we themselves?" Rowland Hill, full of years and crowned with honour, is no more, and not a biographer worthy of his genius and character has yet appeared to do justice to his memory. He deserved a Boswell. ] this in all sincerity ; for enmities and prejudices ought to be buried in the tomb.

In reference to male servants, it may be proper to mention the sad deterioration of morals which experience by being taken to the lobbies and avenues of the Theatre, and being forced to spend, while waiting for their respective families, so many hours with the most profligate of both sexes, that are always to be found in these haunts of iniquity. Thus a kn

aided by companionship and example. Let us conjecture that it is entirely destitute of every thing like religion, but what man is able to discover by his conscience, and the light of reason. Imagine, if you can, that some benevolent company of players, touched with compassion at the deplorable ignorance and wickedness of the inhabitants of this city, should kindly undertake to instruct them by amusement and theatrical representation. And, to complete the fiction, suppose they were to take with them a goodly number of the most popular dramatic pieces which have received the sanction and applause of a Christian audience ; do you think that, after a fair trial, the inhabitants would be the better or the worse for their instruction ? Now I maintain, that a Theatre,

ledge of all the vices of the town is conveyed to the female domestics and the younger branches of the family, from which the most serious practical evils not unfrequently ensue. I believe this subject is treated with becoming severity by Mrs. More in her "Thoughts on the Religion of the Fashionable World."

much more pure than any Europe ever was established in a city exactly circumstanced as the imaginary one which I have described, and the result was, increasing depravity, moral refinement, effeminacy, and ultimate destruction. The city to which I refer is Athens, and the Theatre that which wisdom and genius did their utmost to support, and which received the homage of every Muse.

It is a remarkable fact, which the advocates of the Theatre, on the principle that it is the friend of morals, must account for if they can, that the Stage has flourished most in the corrupt and depraved state of society. It comes it to pass, that in proportion as morality, industry, and religion, advance, its influence, that the Theatre is deserted and neglected, and that it grows in favour in the ratio as virtue and religion decline? How often it happened, too, if the Stage be the school of virtue, that the most dissolute and abandoned of mankind are its passionate admirers, warmest advocates; that those who trample on every moral obligation, and despise the

tions of religion, have, in every age, afforded the Theatre their most cordial support? “ ’Tis strange, ’tis passing strange,” that those whose lives contradict almost every injunction in the Decalogue, should be charmed with the beauty and excellence of virtue on the Stage. But the truth is, the Stage is the nursery of depravity, and the accomplice of crime. The virtue, falsely so called, which it inculcates, is vice softened and refined, or it would not receive the voluntary suffrage of every pupil of iniquity.\*

That the Theatre has widened the circle of dissipation—that it has given a mortal stab to the virtue and happiness of youth of both sexes in the higher and subordinate classes of society, are facts too notorious to be denied, and too fatal not to be deplored by every friend of human nature.

\* If the Theatre be a school for morality, we may reasonably conclude, that its most diligent and persevering attendants are the best scholars,—that they are in fact the most virtuous of men, except the professors who are constantly engaged in teaching the science.

Dissipation and extravagance are teeming sources of wretchedness, and are often the forerunners of every vice: to the love of pleasure the grave and necessary pursuits of life are made to yield, and expense is a trivial consideration when cupidity is to be gratified. But money is not always within the grasp—it is not always ready to administer to every rising wish; this generates gloomy discontent, or something worse. It not unfrequently leads to gambling among the higher, and to more unlicensed robbery among the lower class of society—examples of which are often exhibited on the Stage. And if the hero be a man of spirit, his reputation suffers, by such expedients, but little diminution.

Another injurious effect which the Theatre produces on morals is, that its votaries always consider reason, and the dictates of virtue, to be subordinate to feeling. Feeling is paramount, and it is every thing; and because it is natural, it must therefore be right: thus, revenge is often preferred to forgiveness, and

the gratification of the moment to the self-denial of virtue. The school which teaches such a doctrine as this can never surely be recommended as friendly to happiness, or to society.

It has indeed been urged, in defence of the Theatre, that it cherishes in the bosom those feelings which are called the charities of human life. But the power of fiction to seize on the affections creates a morbid sensibility—a sensibility which leaves the heart a stranger to compassion—a sensibility which led Sterne to weep over a dead ass, while he could suffer a living mother to mourn in poverty, without either sympathy or assistance.

A superficial glance around a Theatre, during the representation of some moving spectacle, might induce the reflection, that the audience was composed of the most amiable and compassionate beings in the world. Who that had not known him but would have thought the tyrant a mild and benevolent prince, when he melted into tears at the public Theatre at Athens? Alas! he was the most cruel and



barbarous of men. Feeling is an indifferent substitute for principle—it is capricious and uncertain ; and in this view contributes nothing to our own, and but little to the happiness of others.

At the Theatre, likewise, those romantic notions are imbibed which disorder the imagination, give a high and fictitious colouring to human life, and lay the foundation for perpetual error and incessant mistakes. From the Theatre many a hapless young man has returned to the world a hero of romance, a would-be poet, a brainless wit, or a fancied Roscius. Bloated with imaginary greatness, he arraigns the Providence which would depress him in the world, and spurns the advice which, to make him happy, would confine him to his original station. The spirit of prophecy is not necessary to foretell that the future lot of such an one must be misery.

I have instances before me, the recollection of which at this moment pains my heart, of the deteriorating influence of the Theatre. It is there that vice steals upon the innocent

and unsuspecting, in the garb of pleasure. And some I have known, who, on visiting the Playhouse, experienced first a change of manners, and then of morals, till the character was depraved and virtue annihilated. These are not solitary instances; nor was the effect accidental,—it is what every rational being would naturally expect to follow, on the supposition that the Stage has any influence in the formation of character. For I am afraid what Dr. Johnson said of the plays of Congreve is too applicable to the greater part of the most popular dramatic pieces of the present day—“It is acknowledged with universal conviction, that the perusal of his works will make no man better, and that their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated.”

I would by no means be thought to institute a comparison between the plays of Congreve and those of our modern writers. Their scenes are not so voluptuous, nor is their language so indelicate and unchaste; yet in general their

tendency is the same ; and I conceive the present age is likely to sustain a far greater injury from its theatrical productions, than even that for which Congreve wrote.\* If our modern plays, like his, were openly immodest and licentious, they would then carry their own antidote with them, and the sober part of mankind would remove at a convenient distance from their contaminating influence. But as our writers for the Stage now manage it, " Vice loses half its evil by losing all its grossness," and consequently is more dangerous than the barefaced obscenities of Dryden and his contemporary already mentioned. A *DOUBLE ENTENDRE* and an arch *EQUIVOQUE* are well understood and applied by a licentious audience ; and the buzz of approbation which is heard through the whole assembly furnishes abundant proof that the effect is not lost. " Many a woman sitting in a Theatre hears without a blush, and without disapprobation looks at, things

\* Some splendid exceptions might be named. But what is *Ion* ? An oasis in the desert.

which, if aught approaching them, were to occur in her presence, she would rise and leave the room, with the air and attitude of insulted virtue."\*

I have no doubt, in addition to the evils already traced to the Theatre, that the alarming progress of suicide, "our island's shame," may be ascribed in a great measure to its influence; for there it is often represented, and in such a manner as to excite the admiration or pity of the audience. The case of Eustace Budgell, one of the writers in the *Spectator*, is strikingly in point, and proves the dangerous influence of what is reckoned one of the best moral plays in the English language. Having involved himself by extravagance in the deepest distress, he plunged into the Thames as the oblivion of sorrow, leaving on his bureau this justification of the fatal deed, "What Cato did, and Addison approved, cannot be wrong." That which is in its own nature evil, cannot by its legitimate influence be productive of good; that which has an immoral tendency will never promote morality.

\* The Theatre, a Sermon by the Rev. Thomas Binney.

It cannot indeed be denied that some dramatic pieces have been received with approbation, which abound in just sentiments, and which contain some good moral principles; but their success must be attributed to other causes than their moral tendency; for had they been filled with the most obnoxious general sentiments, their dramatic beauty and their construction for stage effect would have rendered them quite as popular.\* The talents of the writer, and not his principles, have secured

\* We should do well in ascertaining the causes which have contributed to the success of these dramas, to remember how the art of the poet, in constructing the character of his hero, has neutralised and rendered ineffectual all the virtuous notions which he seems desirous to inculcate. Mrs. More justly remarks—"Even in these plays, in which the principles which false honour teaches are neither professedly inculcated nor vindicated, yet the hero who has been reprieved from sin, during four acts, by the sage remonstrance of some interfering friend, or the imperious power of beauty; beauty, which is to a stage hero that restraining or impelling power, which law, or conscience, or Scripture, are to other men; still in the conclusion, when

him applause. This is not an unfair conclusion, because the same audience has bestowed

the intrigue is dexterously completed, when the passion is worked up to its acmè, and the valedictory scene is so near at hand, that it becomes inconvenient to the poet that the impetuosity of his hero should be any longer restrained, when his own patience and the expostulating powers of his friend are both exhausted together, and he seasonably winds up the drama by stabbing either his secret enemy or his best benefactor; or, as it still more frequently happens, himself; still, notwithstanding his criminal catastrophe, the hero has been exhibited through all the preceding scenes as such a combination of perfections; his behaviour has been so brave and so generous (and bravery and generosity are two qualities which the world boldly stakes against both tables of the Decalogue) that the youthful spectator, especially if he have that amiable warmth and sensibility of soul which lay him so plausibly open to seduction, is too much tempted to consider as venial the sudden and unpremeditated crime to which the unresisted impulse of the moment may have driven so accomplished a character. And a little tame tag of morality, set to a few musical periods by the unimpassioned friend, is borne down, absorbed, lost, in the impetuous, but too engaging character of the feeling, fiery hero; a character, the errors of which are

praise on productions the most immoral and licentious, on account of the charms of poetry with which they were enriched, and their power to interest the passions.

But if it could even be established, that during a century as many as fifty moral plays have

now consummated by an act of murder, so affectingly managed that censure is swallowed up in pity; the murderer is absolved by the weeping auditory, who are ready, if not to justify the crime, yet to vindicate the criminal. The drowsy moral at the close, slowly attempts to creep after the poison of the piece, but it creeps in vain; it can never expel that which it can never reach; for one stroke of feeling, one natural expression of the passions, be the principle right or wrong, carries away the affections of the auditor, beyond any of the poet's force of reasoning to control. And *they* know little of the power of the dramatic art, or of the conformation of the human mind, who do not know that the heart of the feeling spectator is always at the command of the passions in the hand of a true poet, who snatches him with uncontrolled dominion—

“ ‘To Thebes and Athens when he will and where.’ ”

*Preface to Tragedies*, p. 31.

received the sanction of the public, this would not affect the general character of the Stage; and I believe it would be impossible, were we to consult the literary and dramatic annals of the last hundred years, to find ten plays that a Christian ought to recommend, or the leading heroes of which any man should consider as models to be observed, or as examples to be followed.

There is one view of the moral influence of the Theatre which I have not taken, and with which I shall conclude this part of the subject, and that is, its influence on the FEMALE CHARACTER.

The importance of woman in society has been universally felt and acknowledged; her influence is potent: to her we are indebted for social comfort and domestic joy; she is the sovereign of our happiness; and the virtue of the human race is committed to her hands. She is the depositary and the guardian of the generation which is to adorn or disgrace a future age; and on her qualifications to discharge the important trust, their destiny in a great measure



depends. It is the glory of civilised man to pay this homage to the sex; and who would not with indignation oppose that which would degrade woman from her eminence? That which would rob her of the peculiar features of her character, which would unfit her for the performance of the various duties appertaining to her station and her sex, is an evil which policy, interest, and every thing which can operate as a motive upon the human breast, call upon us to detest. Preserve her native modesty,—let her heart confine its wishes and its affections within the circle of intellectual improvement, domestic duties, and domestic pleasures, and woman becomes what her Creator designed, “a help meet for man;” the gentle friend of his youth; the kind instructor as well as the mother of his children; his counsellor in difficulties, the soother of his sorrows in affliction; and, I may almost add, the arbitress of his fate. But transform her character: let modesty, the guardian of every female virtue, retire; let the averted eye, which turns disgusted from the remotest approach of evil, grow confident; let that delicacy of senti-

ment which feels a "stain like a wound," give place to fashionable apathy; let the love of home, and a taste for the sweetly interesting employments of the domestic scene, be exchanged for the pursuits of theatrical entertainment, and the vagrant disposition of a stylish belle, and the picture is reversed; the female is degraded, and society has lost its most powerful, captivating charm; man is comfortless and alone; he must go abroad for pleasure; miserable wanderer! his children clasp the knees of a stranger—home has no attractions—he has no kindred heart to partake of his joys and sorrows; the world is before him; it allures and intoxicates, but it does not make him happy. Where is the enemy that has done this? What has dashed the cup of domestic enjoyment to the ground?—One principal agent is the Stage. Let the theatrical passion once be cherished in a female bosom, and farewell modesty; the taste is vitiated, and domestic happiness is gone.

"It is at the Theatre," says the Abbé Clement, "our daughters are taught the art of skilfully conducting an intrigue, of concealing

from their parents the secrets of their hearts, of cherishing a passion condemned by propriety and morality."

There is a charm in native modesty, which, when wanting only in appearance, renders the conversation even of a sensible woman any thing but pleasing. But I know not how the appearance of modesty can be retained, when the eye must be accustomed to scenes which ingenuous youth of the other sex can scarcely behold without disgust. The world may call a woman virtuous, who, with a countenance of brass, can sit unmoved when heaven is insulted by profaneness, and the audience by oaths; when decency is trampled on, and licentiousness indulged; and this may be the current virtue of a depraved age: but give me the innocence which shrinks at the touch of vice. When the outworks of modesty are demolished, the conquest of the citadel is comparatively easy. It is at the Theatre that simplicity has learnt to cast off its decent robe, and innocence has changed its modest blush, its retiring mien, for the theatrical stare, and the imposing, dauntless front of the actress.

Upon the whole, I am persuaded that the Theatre is one great source whence have flowed those contaminating streams, which have had so fatal an influence in depraving the female character in the higher classes of society. It is to this, I fear, among other causes, we may trace the adulteries and the crimes of fashionable life ; it is this, too, which has rendered the helpless female the easy prey of a false seducer. When once a woman is brought to consider the delirium of a heart abandoned to the disorder of the senses to be virtue, and the indulgence of vitiated feelings to be happiness,—persuasion may complete her ruin, and passion may be the harbinger of infamy. It is on the Stage “that passion is identified with virtue :” teach a female this, and where is the safeguard of honour ; where the security of happiness ? It is gone—it is fled for ever. Mrs. More, in the Preface to her tragedies, has shown her profound knowledge of the female heart, and her great concern for the preservation of female purity—the Stage in her view is the enemy of both ; but let us hear her on the subject. “A

virtuous young woman, it will be said, who has been correctly educated, will turn with abhorrence from the unchaste scenes of a *loose* play. It is indeed so to be hoped; and yet many plays, which really deserve that character, escape that denomination. But I concede this point, and proceed to the more immediate object of my animadversions. The remark may be thought preposterous, should I observe, that, to a chaste and delicate young mind, there is in *good plays* one danger which I will venture to assert is almost more formidable than that which is often attached to pieces more obviously censurable. The more refined and delicate the passion of love is made to appear, the more insinuating, and of course the more dangerous, will the exquisite and reiterated representation of that passion be found. Now, love being the grand business of plays, those young ladies who are frequently attending them will be liable to nourish a feeling which is often strong enough of itself, without the constant supply of foreign fuel, namely, that love is the grand business of life also. If

the passion be avowedly illicit, her well-instructed conscience will arm her with scruples, and her sense of decorum will set her on her guard. While, on the other hand, the greater the purity with which the passion is exhibited, provided the exhibition be very touching and warm, the more deep and irresistible will be its effect on a tender and inexperienced heart; nay, the more likely will the passion, acted on the stage, be to excite a corresponding passion in the heart of the young spectatress. If she have not yet felt the passion she sees so finely pourtrayed, she will wish to feel it, and her not having felt it, she will consider as something wanting to the perfection of her nature. She will ascribe the absence of it to a defect in her own heart which must be supplied, or to some untowardness in her own circumstances which must be removed. Thus her imagination will do the work of the passions, and the fancy will anticipate the feelings of the heart; the source this of some of the most fatal disorders in the female character! Now, to captivate such a tender and affectionate heart as that we are

considering, the semblance of virtue is necessary; for while she will conceive of criminal passion as censurable, she will be equally apt to consider the most imprudent passion as justifiable, so long as the idea of absolute crime is kept at a distance. If the love be represented as avowedly vicious, instead of lending herself to the illusion, she will allow it ought to be sacrificed to duty; but if she thinks it innocent, she persuades herself that every duty ought to be sacrificed to *it*,—nay, she will value herself in proportion as she thinks she could imitate the heroine who is able to love with so much violence and so much purity at the same time. By frequent repetition, especially if there be a taste for romance and poetry in the innocent young mind, the feelings are easily transplanted from the Theatre to the closet; they are made to become a standard of action, and are brought home as the regulators of life and manners. The heart being thus filled with the pleasures of love, a new era takes place in her mind, and she carries about with her an aptitude to receive any impression

herself, and a constantly waking and active desire to make this impression in return. The plain and sober duties of life begin to be uninteresting ; she wishes them to be diversified with events, and enlivened by heroes. Though she retains her virtue, her sober-mindedness is impaired ; for she longs to be realising those pains and pleasures, and to be acting over those scenes and sacrifices, which she so often sees represented. If the evils arising from frequent scenic representations to a young woman were limited to the single inconvenience that it makes her sigh to be a heroine, it would be a strong reason why a discreet and pious mother should be slow in introducing her to them."

Hitherto my animadversions have been directed against the Stage, on the broad ground of its being opposed to the happiness of man as a member of civil society. I would now particularly trace its influence, as it retards the progress of vital Christianity.

Christianity is the balm of life ; its healing virtue invigorates the exhausted powers, en-



livenes the depressed spirits, silences tormenting apprehensions, and tranquillises the agitated breast. There is no depth of human woe which it cannot fathom: "Like the fabled power of enchantment, it changes the thorny couch into a bed of down; closes with a touch the wounds of the soul; and converts a wilderness of sorrow into the borders of paradise." But Christianity, calculated as it is to banish guilt and wretchedness from the world, is powerless and ineffectual until it becomes a vital principle in the heart, until its doctrines are cordially embraced, and its morality implicitly obeyed. To yield a cold assent to its evidences, to enlist under its standard by merely wearing its name as a badge of distinction, is in fact not to believe in it at all:—it must be welcomed to the bosom, and must there be enthroned, or the blessings which follow in its train can never be enjoyed.

Perhaps there are very few persons who would deliberately renounce the Christian faith, I would hope there are fewer still who do not feel abhorrence when they think of the philo-

sophical association with Voltaire at its head, which was formed to annihilate Christianity, and whose watch-word, when the holy Jesus was to be assailed, was, "Crush the wretch!" But it is to be feared there are many of this description, who, while they believe that a disavowal of Christianity would be the renunciation of all future hope, are yet very far from being Christians indeed. They really and in fact give up every thing in Christianity, but the name; *that* they retain as a sort of charm to lull an accusing conscience to repose, and to neutralise the terrors of death. The opinions they reverence are such as the New Testament rejects as pernicious and destructive; the code of morals which they have formed to themselves, independently of the Gospel, is such as the Christian Legislator never enforced; and Christians of this character are remarkable for nothing so much as an universal departure, both in spirit and conduct, from their great Exemplar.

Among a great variety of causes which have contributed to produce this strange inconsistency and opposition between name and prin-

ciple, profession and practice, we may reckon the Stage. This enemy has robbed many of the little religion which they once possessed, and lodged in the hearts of others the strongest prejudices against the practical influence of Christianity. The fashionable religionists of the present day are illustrations of the first part of this assertion ; and the difficulty which persons under a powerful conviction of the truth and importance of religion, feel in resigning to its influence, their last favourite—the Stage,—is a proof of the other part.

When I hear some fashionable Christians converse, when I behold their conduct in the world, I at once perceive, that the actor on the boards has a far greater influence than the monitor in the pulpit; and an attendance on both has produced such an oddity and inconsistency of character, that Adam would scarcely know his offspring; and Jesus of Nazareth must certainly disfranchise them from all the privileges and immunities which distinguish his genuine followers.

The Theatre, when resorted to by persons

who profess to have embraced the Christian religion in its peculiar doctrines and strict morality, soon displays its wonder-working power ; religion quickly resigns the throne to pleasure ; the doctrines of the cross give place to a less severe and more accommodating system ; or if the creed remain unaltered, it loses its practical effect—" The salt has lost its savour ;" the peculiar features of the Christian character are gradually softened down till they disappear.

I am aware it will be no easy task to persuade the religious lovers of the Stage that it has produced this effect upon them ; for apostasy from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel is a disease, which, while it strikes every eye besides, is concealed from the miserable patient himself. It was when the church at Laodicea was poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked, that she imagined herself rich and increased in goods. If a person, professing to be regulated in his spirit and conduct by the pure morality of the Gospel, can be gratified with amusements, which are pursued with avidity by the vicious and the vain, in exact proportion as

he derives pleasure from these amusements he must be departing from the spirit of Christianity; \* for Christianity aims to produce a character singular, and every way unlike the character of those who are the abettors of the Stage. If one fashionable amusement more than another be stamped with the features of what is called in the Gospel, "The world," it is the Theatre. Before a person can seek pleasure from the drama he must have imbibed much of the spirit of the world : for there every thing is exhibited, and admired, to which the Christian Lawgiver has said, " Be not conformed." When Christians sanction the Stage, they betray their religion into the hands of the enemy ; and Christianity is more effectually injured by these, its pretended friends, than by the open attacks of the most hostile and inveterate of its avowed adversaries.† To such

\* See this illustrated in the Appendix. A Chapter from Happiness.

† Mr. Hill has favoured us with the following characteristic observations, which I insert on account of *their quaintness and point* :—

Christians I would recommend consistency, and advise them never to absent themselves from

“That which is innocent can never hurt the mind ; and, according to the word of God, every Christian should be in a perpetual *aptitude* for prayer. Should therefore, any of the *uncharitable* laity suppose *some* of the clergy to be the ringleaders and promoters of such amusements as are *not innocent*, I humbly advise them, as a proof of their spirituality, and to show how well such diversions as they recommend will mix with a spirit of true devotion, that some of them would compose a new manual for these purposes : and as a further proof that the criterion of prayer is a just one, I humbly recommend to my reverend brethren the following mottoes for the new-intended manual :—

“ ‘Pray without ceasing.’ 1 Thess. v. 17.

“ ‘Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit ; and watching thereunto with all perseverance.’ Eph. vi. 18.

“ ‘Continuing instant in prayer.’ Rom. xii. 12.

“ ‘In every thing give thanks ; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.’ ” 1 Thess. v. 18.

To the *pious* compiler of this new publication, for I believe this is entirely new ground, I beg leave to recommend forms of prayer on the following occasions :

A devout supplication before going to a tragedy.

the Theatre when the play-bills announce for performance—"The Hypocrite."

Another before going to a comedy.

A short form of prayer to be said before a farce.

Another short prayer before a harlequin entertainment.

Then let the clergyman direct his *devout* disciple not to omit any of the accustomed forms before going to bed ; but, as a proof of proper gratitude to Almighty God for such *blessed innocent amusements*, to add a *thanksgiving prayer* ; which, for the sake of avoiding prolixity, may be made equally suitable to each of the four above-mentioned occasions.

But to finish the plan of our new intended manual, which I would recommend to be short, that it may be portable and snug for the pocket, fit also to be bound up with the "Week's Preparation, or Companion to the Altar," should there not be a proper prayer made at *entering a ball-room*, and another returning therefrom ? Another prayer may be also necessary for a *card assembly*, together with a few *holy ejaculations* to be said between the deals. I could also recommend the composing of a *hunter's prayer*, and the *horse-racer's prayer* : but then we should get too much into the line of such as *honestly* declare that they make no pretensions to religion ; and as such they act much

The stage has operated against Christianity two ways ;—its morality has always been diametrically opposite to the morality of the Gospel, and consequently it produces an antichristian character :—it has also vitiated the taste by raising the passions above their proper tone, and thus inducing a dislike and aversion to grave and serious subjects, which have nothing to recommend them but their simplicity and importance.

*Christian Morality and the Morality of the Stage contrasted.*

The sublime morality of the Gospel has ex-  
more consistently, and, as members of society, are not to be treated with sanctimonious contempt, though followed with our good wishes and prayers till the time shall come that God may bless them with a better choice.

I lastly observe, that, if such diversions will not bend into proper subjects for devotion, no *devout* persons, especially none of the clergy, who are devout *ex officio*, should ever attend them, as such an attendance is beneath the dignity of their honourable and sacred function, and consequently does the greatest injury to religion, and brings it into the completest contempt."



cited the admiration, if not the love, of all mankind: even infidels, who proudly contemn the Christian faith, have paid their reluctant homage to that system of morals which the genius of Christianity has revealed, and which by its sanctions it inculcates and maintains. This morality has indeed renounced the spurious virtues of a depraved world; it calls nothing good but that which really is so in the nature of things; it perplexes and renders ridiculous many terms in the nomenclature of moral science, invented by mere philosophers and poets; and that which conduces not to the happiness of man as an individual, or a social being, however specious its appearance, it despises and condemns. In this it is singularly indifferent to the prejudices and sentiments of mankind; it neither courts their admiration, nor deprecates their censure:—as the instructor of a world, its tone is dignified and firm. Its system is open to the inspection of all, but it accommodates its principles and injunctions to none. What is good it enjoins:

what is evil, and even that which has the appearance of evil, it forbids.

The morality of the Gospel is strict but necessary, and is austere to those only who are vitiated and destitute of the spirit. It is an unerring guide in every path, and in every situation of life; to the children of men it kindly speaks, and its language is, "This is the way, walk ye in it; this is the only infallible Mentor: other self-appointed instructors will present themselves on the road, assuming the garb, and sometimes the language of Christianity: but of these we are commanded to beware; their steps lead down to death." But it not unfrequently happens that the enemy of man is caressed as his friend, and welcomed by general consent to the heart. We should, however, recollect, that it may not be virtue which the multitude applauds, and that he is not the sincerest friend who is the most insinuating, and who boasts of his qualifications. The sentiments of what is called a Christian public are not always to be regarded as Christianity. The subtle writer who, to

restore the moral constitution, mingles sweet poison with his medicine, is a quack in ethics, and, like all empirics, kills where he ought to cure. From what is known of the human heart, no man, who avails himself of such a method of doing good, will ever succeed ; he departs from the genius and spirit of Christianity. He who consults the public taste, and who would conciliate the depraved passions which lurk in the bosom, in order to convey instruction to the mind, will destroy his pupils ; to every grain of virtue conveyed in this dangerous vehicle there must be an ounce of destructive vice. Such a pretender to moral science, when contrasted with the Gospel, is the Stage.

The Gospel is moral in every view, and every way hostile to sin. The Stage dazzles with a few specious qualities, which are greatly exceeded by entire characters of disgusting vice. Sometimes, indeed, the midnight horror of iniquity experiences a momentary illumination by a solitary flash of virtuous sentiment ; but even its best sentiments are tainted ; and, when

compared with the Gospel, retire into nothing, or worse than nothing ; while its counterfeit virtues, and real vices, are fatally destructive to morals.

The ascendancy of the passions over reason—the perversion of reason by inherent depravity, is the source of all human misery. To destroy this ascendancy—to sanctify the passions—and to impart a holy principle to reason, is the object and the aim of Christianity ;—its doctrines, its precepts, the sublime example which it proposes, all and equally tend to restore man to holiness and happiness. Thus every thing in the Gospel is directly opposed to pride and ambition, to anger and revenge, to levity and wantonness : every page of this invaluable book inculcates humility and contentment, condescension and meekness, sobriety and chastity : a spirit of fervent piety breathes from the alpha to the omega of the New Testament ; and its fundamental principle is—“Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” The man whose life is regulated by Christianity acknowledges God in all

his enjoyments, and submits to his equitable government, without murmur or complaint, in the hour of suffering and distress. Let a person who has read the Gospel till its spirit is all his own—till its principles are deeply rooted within him—let such an one enter the Theatre, our modern school of virtue ; and if it were possible to detain him there during the performance of one evening, what would be his sensations—what his compunction—that he had ever passed the unhallowed threshold of this sanctuary of folly and delusion ?

Christianity aims to complete the moral character, and acknowledges none as its votaries till they renounce every sin. The Stage fixes on one or two amiable qualities, which can scarcely be considered as virtues, to atone for a thousand follies and a thousand crimes ; and it is remarkable, that on the Stage those qualities only are applauded, which a man may possess while he is entirely destitute of religion ; and others too are commended which he ought not, which he cannot possess, if he be a real Christian. If an individual be frank, open, generous,

and brave, he has, according to the vocabulary of the Stage, "a good heart." He may be an adulterer, a libertine, a despiser of God, and a trampler on his laws, and these are only human frailties.

Will it not then be acknowledged, with universal conviction, that the morality of the Stage, and the morality of the Gospel, are irreconcilably at variance; that there is little, if any thing, in common between them; and that in proportion as the one advances in the formation of character, an effectual barrier is opposed to the influence and success of the other?

The Stage is a miserable school for the conduct of life; its most finished character is the slave of passion, the creature of the moment, without capacity or inclination to perform the most essential duties which are required of him as a social being. The good man of the Theatre, who receives the plaudits of a Christian audience, is not a Christian; his principles are taught in a seminary where Christ has no authority, and are directly opposite to those

which Christianity would implant in the breast. It is a maxim with him, that vicious gratification is to be preferred to suffering virtue ; that ambition is superior to contentment ; that pride is necessary to carry a man with decency through the world ; that resentment is manly spirit ; and patience of injuries meanness and degradation. Such, with respect to the conduct of life, is a character formed by the Stage. And the objects which the Theatre instructs its votaries to pursue are as antichristian as the principles which it would recommend. It is said of the Christian, that he lives in the present world—"as seeing him who is invisible:" he considers himself as a stranger and traveller, whose goal is immortality, and whose reward is the approving smile of Heaven : he pursues an incorruptible treasure, and proclaims himself to be the denizen of a city whose builder and maker is God.

"The high-born soul

Disdains to rest her heaven-aspiring wing

Beneath its native quarry."

The degraded pupil of the Stage, on the

contrary, has no prospects beyond the limits of mortality ; his horizon is the grave ; his schemes are all “earthly, sensual, or devilish ;” the highest precept of his instructor is—“Live while you live.” What Foster beautifully declares of elegant literature, is strikingly applicable to the best theatrical productions which are exhibited on the Stage, with all the pomp of scenery, gesture, and action. The Theatre “does not instruct a man to act, to enjoy, and to suffer, as a being that may to-morrow have finally abandoned this orb ; every thing is done to beguile the feeling of his being a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth.” The Stage “endeavours to raise the groves of an earthly paradise, to shade from sight that vista which opens to the distance of eternity.”

So completely a man of this world is the hero of the Theatre, that if disappointment, which is the common lot of humanity, overtake him, he is inconsolable ; and, as if his fortune and happiness were for ever wrecked, he mourns that “the Everlasting has fixed his canon ’gainst self-murder ;” or, forgetting



entirely that there is an Almighty Being and a future state, he ends with his own hands what he fondly hopes is the whole of his existence. This method of closing the earthly scene is peculiar to him who makes this world all important, and who is regardless of another. The very tendency of the Theatre leads to this; having confined objects worthy of pursuit to a present state, it teaches—that want of success is the loss of every thing; and that a man, whom the world and benignant fortune disown, has no business with life.

The pleasures of a character formed by the Theatre, are such as Christianity forbids, and which to the Christian are insipid and disgusting.

These two beings seem to be cast in a different mould: THAT of which the one speaks with rapture, upon which he reflects with satisfaction, and to the repetition of which he looks forward with delight, is to the other nauseous; he rejects it “with hatefulest disrelish,” and avoids it as the minister of pain. The pursuit of both is happiness; but in what

different paths is it sought by each ! and how opposite the sources from whence it is derived ! I know of no worse purgatory to a man whose character the Stage has formed, than to be doomed to converse and associate with a real Christian. Place an individual of this description beside the seraphic John, or holy Paul ; let them both disclose the sources of their enjoyments, the objects which in the possession afford them pleasure, and the anticipations that charm them with the delights of hope, and you will at once perceive that every thing is dissimilar and opposite : the apostle views his companion with pity and concern : the companion regards the apostle with wonder and contempt.

It may perhaps be urged, that without the influence of the Theatre, every man destitute of religion would be equally averse from the conduct, the pursuits, and the pleasures of the Christian. That the depravity of the human heart is a decided foe to exalted scriptural piety, is undoubtedly true ; but surely it is possible to mature the seeds of vice, to increase the natural enmity of the human mind against

the Gospel, by arming it with prejudice, and deluding it with error. This is effectually done when the world creates its instructor, and becomes its own law-giver; when it establishes a school where mankind are flattered into a persuasion that the human heart, without the salutary, transforming influence of religion, is the seat of virtuous principle; that sufferings, which are the consequences of guilt, may be considered as an atonement for crime; and that he who has lived imperfectly virtuous, even according to its own system of virtue, while his heart is estranged from God, may, nevertheless, confidently expect the mercy of heaven. Clothed in this panoply furnished by the Stage, the heart is assailed by Christianity in vain; for it is the Stage that inculcates doctrines like these, and impresses their characters indelibly on the soul. Man is naturally pleased with the teacher that prophesies good concerning him, while he turns away with aversion from the less accommodating instructor, who, fearless of consequences, would force upon him unwelcome truth; and the

more he is captivated by the one, his prejudices are increased and strengthened against the other.

No one, I think, will seriously deny, that a man who has imbibed the general sentiments enforced on the Stage, is a more decided enemy to pure unsophisticated Christianity, than he who has never yielded to its influence; for though the latter may be depraved, and consequently averse from vital religion, yet his heart is not fortified with the prejudices of error; and whatever opposition is to be subdued by the Gospel, previous to its complete triumph over him, it has not to contend with the impressions of a theatrical character. It has no ingenious sophistry to unravel, no enchanting visions to disrobe of their fallacious beauty, no dazzling, yet destructive principles of action to eradicate.

To err in our ideas of moral obligation, and the nature and extent of moral science, is fatal to individual and social happiness. Such error is a formidable opponent to Christianity—it makes us miserable, and keeps us so. Yet, the

Stage is the school where pure morality is mutilated, tarnished, and perplexed ; where precept and example combine their influence to form a character whose every feature Christianity must efface before it can be admitted into the heart. In proportion, therefore, to the moral influence of the Stage, must be the sum of human wretchedness. That this influence operates strongly against Christianity, will appear from another view of the subject.

*The Stage raises the passions above their proper tone, and thus induces a dislike to grave and serious subjects, which have nothing but their simplicity and importance to recommend them.*

The Gospel is simple and grave ; it rejects with indignation the foreign aid of ornament ; to recommend itself to the world, it depends on nothing but its own intrinsic excellence. The enticing words of man's wisdom, the finesse of oratory, the rich attire, the modern drapery, in which some advocates of "pulpit eloquence" would fain invest Divine truth, are but the efforts of imbecility to adorn a theme, whose dignity is plainness, whose nature is

simplicity. The Theatre and theatrical productions are just the reverse of this ; and an attendance on the Stage has, in this view, been greatly prejudicial to Christianity. The Stage, as its doctrines and precepts are congenial with the frame and disposition of the human heart, as it nourishes, or at best but refines the degeneracy of our depraved nature, so there is every thing in its manner to fascinate, to allure, and to impress. The passions, our treacherous enemies, are touched by the scenes of the Drama, and bewilder and delude the understanding.

Poetry, music, action, oratory, all, enlisted in the cause of fiction, combine their influence to draw off the mind from the simple and the useful ; while a passion for the romantic, the showy, and the splendid, is excited and increased. The soul is elated, and sometimes wound up to rapture, and sentiments thus conveyed neither time nor occupation will ever efface. The most dangerous effect produced by the Theatre in this view is, that it absolutely debilitates the mind, and renders it inaccessible

by simple, yet everlastingly important, truth. As the powers are raised above their proper tone by artificial impulse, the best instructions conveyed in a different method are nugatory and vain. What Mr. R. P. Knight has said of the passion for romances and novels, is strikingly true of the Stage; it produces "a sickly sensibility of mind, which is equally adverse to the acquisition of useful knowledge and sound morality." The passions which guard the avenues to the understanding have received a kind of stupor, from which nothing but theatrical power can rouse them. A weak stimulus will not act after one that is more powerful. Thus sentiments, however pernicious and destructive to the moral character, received at the Theatre, continually deepen their impression, till they are absolutely indelible: they become the inseparable attendants on consciousness, and the individual must forget himself to lose these his constant companions. If his mind ever ask for new ideas; if, not satiated with what it already has attained, it longs for more, he must visit the Theatre: reading

is insipid, except a novel relieve the tedious interval ; conversation for improvement is dull and uninteresting ; nothing can seize his attention powerfully but the Drama.

It is said of Sir Matthew Hale, " That he was an extraordinary proficient at school, and for some time at Oxford ; but the stage players coming thither, he was so much corrupted by seeing plays, that he almost wholly forsook his studies. By this he not only lost much time, but found that his head was thereby filled with vain images of things ; and being afterwards sensible of the mischief of this, he resolved, upon his coming to London, never to see a play again, to which resolution he constantly adhered."

If, then, a love for the Stage unfit the mind for the acquisition of useful knowledge, which has no connection with religion, how seriously hostile must it be to Christianity ! I knew a young man so bewitched by the Theatre, that he felt an absolute incapacity to read the most interesting productions in science and theology. " Around this enchanted spot (said he to a



friend) I lingered long, till its fatal influence had nearly beguiled me of my salvation : I thought the Gospel insipid, and lessons of morality insufferably disgusting ; and had not the powers of the world to come roused me from this moral lethargy, Christianity would have continued my aversion, and the Stage my idol." The indignant eloquence of the Abbé Clement will also assist me here. The Theatre, say its advocates, informs and relieves the mind. " Yes, if to make all useful reading insipid ; to withdraw the mind, by an indescribable and secret charm, from every serious and important occupation ; to deprave the taste, by exciting an insurmountable aversion to simplicity, and an exclusive admiration of the marvellous ; and to debase the feelings, by destroying all sense of gratification but in the most violent agitations of the soul ;—if this be to inform the mind, the argument is irresistible. My friends, this description is not overcharged ; you know that it is not ; you know that these are the effects of the best-regulated Stage." To live in fairy land, and to converse with fiction, is

charming; but it has the same effect on the intellectual and moral constitution as opium on the natural. There are pleasures in madness which only madmen know; but what rational being would envy the maniac his joys? And if fiction and the Stage rob us of sober truth and reasonable pleasure; if when we break from their influence, we are left without consolation, and without hope, shall we yield to their enchantment, or suffer ourselves to be carried away by such delusory vanities? When their fatal tendency is considered; when we reflect, that subjects, the most essential and important, fail to impress a theatrical mind; that religious and moral improvement can never be attained, while we accustom ourselves to the pleasures of the Stage, shall we for a moment hesitate which to abandon?

The most preposterous inconsistency marks that man's character, who, while he pretends to venerate Christianity, can admit for a moment the opposing claims of the Theatre. Irreconcilable enemies cannot be seated on the same throne; and the love of vital religion

cannot exist in the heart that feels the remotest approach to a theatrical passion. That the Stage is in every view hostile to the spirit and influence of Christianity, is a question which may soon be decided by an impartial examination of the New Testament, and those theatrical productions which have allured and deceived the world.

My views of the Gospel may, perhaps, be condemned by some, as unreasonably strict and severe; yet, I think, if the Christian Lawgiver be deemed infallible, and if the system of morals which he has made known be admitted without mutilation or change, objections on this ground will vanish into air. Those who consider the New Testament as the standard and the source of evangelical and moral truth, must acknowledge that I have only copied from the great original; that the "Sermon on the Mount," and the hortatory eloquence of Paul, are in perfect unison with that delineation of Christian ethics which I have feebly made; between which and the Theatre there is the widest difference, and the greatest opposition.

By suffering the Gospel to speak out its claims, by exhibiting its native character, without reference or regard to the sentiments and prejudices of mankind, I am conscious of having exposed myself to the charge of fanaticism. The accommodating moralist and the fashionable divine, will each depart from his usual softness, and visit me with the unpoliteness of vulgar censure. But this is nothing new; it is no uncommon thing to affect to despise that to which we have no disposition to conform. Accordingly, pure unsophisticated Christianity has ever been held in derision by those whose conduct it impugns, and whose principles it condemns. "The world is not its friend, nor the world's law." And its advocates must expect to share in the obloquy which it is doomed to suffer. But let no man shrink from a firm and dignified avowal, that he is the friend, the admirer, the champion, of a system which is Divine. Unmoved by censure or applause, the cause he should consider as every thing. Secure in the approbation of conscience, the opposition of

men he should cheerfully sustain, or nobly disregard.

I pity the man whose passion for fame leads him to court the approbation of his fellow-creatures, at the expense of their virtue; who thrusts Christianity into the shade, when it ought to occupy the throne; or, if he bring it forward at all, so softens its features, so transforms its character, that it becomes the creature of a depraved mind, rather than the infinitely pure system of a Divine Author. Let it never be forgotten, that it is altogether out of the character of Christianity, to act a subservient or accommodating part; she must be invested with absolute authority, or she is in fact discarded and despised.

If Christianity, therefore, be the religion of our choice, our amusements and our amusing instructors should be conformed to its nature, and pervaded by its spirit. Conscious that in this reasoning there is some force, Christians who plead for the Stage have fallen into a dangerous error; they have disfigured and tarnished the pure, immaculate robe of Christi-

anity, while they have bedizened the Theatre with ornaments and beauties which it never possessed but in their imagination. And, thus, when the Gospel is "shorn of its beams," and the Stage arrayed in borrowed, adventitious splendour, a sort of resemblance is artfully produced between them.

It not a little surprised me, that such a writer as Knox should evidently sanction the Theatre, that he should commend in the gross (for he has not discriminated) the MORAL tendency of the plays of Otway and Rowe.

After having "entered into all the feelings" of these writers, when we have "assimilated with their souls," let us take up the volume of truth and righteousness; and we must certainly acknowledge, that however gratifying it may be to feel with the Drama, it is not Christian feeling; it is something the very reverse, which Christianity would suppress, and which Christians therefore ought not to indulge. Yet Dr. Knox is a Christian divine, whose writings in general do honour to his profession.

If any men more than others are bound to throw their whole weight of influence into the scale opposite to the Theatre, they are **CLERGYMEN**, who by profession are sacred teachers of sacred truth. For divines to prostitute their talents by writing for the Stage, is to destroy with one hand what they build with the other: they are vainly attempting to serve two masters of opposite claims, and of characters so essentially different, that if they love the one, they must despise the other. Equally culpable are those who sanction the Theatre by their presence and example. Language cannot reprobate in terms sufficiently strong the conduct of those "pliable priests," who waste their evenings in sauntering about the Theatre; sometimes in the boxes, then in the lobby, and other places of public and indecent resort. Clerical fops, who, "familiar with a round of ladyships, make God's work a sinecure." But there are who glory in their shame. Censure is lost upon those who dread no charge so much as that of being sincerely in earnest in their sacred profession. This would be brand-

ing them with infamy indeed ! But however long the catalogue of their follies and their crimes, this will never be inserted as one of its items.



## CHAPTER V.

CURSORY OBSERVATIONS ON THE WRITERS FOR  
THE STAGE, ON THE ACTORS AND THE AUDI-  
ENCE, ILLUSTRATIVE OF ITS DANGEROUS AND  
IMMORAL TENDENCY.

THAT which has prostituted and debased the finest talents, instead of claiming the favour, certainly merits the severest reprobation of mankind. It is truly affecting to behold men sacrifice the dignity of superior intellect at the shrine of folly and of vice : yet such has been the sacrifice the Theatre has demanded of its writers. It is a notorious fact, that theatrical authors relax, soften, and abridge the code of morals : to be successful, they must always accommodate their characters to the prevailing taste : instead of giving “ ardour to virtue and confidence to truth,” which is the only dignified employment of literary talents, they must

submit to the humiliating drudgery of gratifying the wishes of the voluptuous and the proud, the licentious and the vain.

The men who have instructed and delighted the world, Addison and Johnson, Thomson and Young, were indeed captivated by the lucrative rewards of the Drama, and wrote for the Stage. But how short-lived was their dramatic fame! These writers could not descend:—they would maintain, even on the Stage, the dignity of the moralist; and this, to a polite audience, rendered their productions dull and uninteresting: yet, it must be acknowledged, warped by the Theatre, they have too often, amidst the finest moral sentiments, departed from the simplicity of virtue. Addison, in his *Cato*, sacrifices at the shrine of patriotism, fortitude, and magnanimity, and reduces his hero at last to a dastardly coward: who, rather than endure the ills he felt, abandoned the post of honour for the grave of the suicide.

Johnson, indeed, “the majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom,” disdained to

court applause as a writer of tragedy at the expense of his taste and virtue, and the consequence was, his "Irene did not please the public." The great dramatic favourites have generally been men of libertine principles.\* The talents of these writers have been eminent; but a "peck of refuse wheat" would more than buy the virtue of all the tribe. Who is there that does not feel the bitterness of regret, while contemplating the greatest intellectual powers, the strongest energies of native genius, exhausted and spent in degrading the human character, which they were intended to exalt and improve? Enlisted on the side of virtue, what might not these men have achieved? But, viewed as they are, the venial servants of the Stage, who can think of them without pity?

It surely is no inconsiderable argument

\* I think we may fairly charge the disgusting immorality that sometimes disfigures the dramas of Shakespeare, upon his having prepared them with a view to actual representation: not as a writer of dramatic performances, but as a writer for the Stage, he deviated from the purity of virtue.

against the Theatre, that it made even Addison forget his virtue and his creed ; and degraded men, of more genius and less principle, from eminence they might have attained to dishonour and infamy ; which for the sake of lucre and temporary renown, they were willing to incur. If a tribunal had not been established which pays homage to talents without virtue, the strongest temptation to vice would not have existed : and without profit or applause, few men would take pleasure in disseminating immorality and misery, for their own sake.

Another collateral argument of some importance against the Stage may be drawn from the general character of PLAYERS. The sentiments of mankind have generally placed persons of this profession beyond the pale of society.\* The story of the unfortunate Labe-rius exhibits in a strong point of view the odium which was attached to the profes-

\* So infamous were persons of this profession deemed by the Romans, that Augustine informs us :—  
“ Romani cum artem ludicram Scenamque totam pro-  
bro ducerent, genus id hominum non modo honore

sion of an actor among the Romans. Compelled by Cæsar, at an advanced period of life, to appear on the Stage to recite some his own works, he felt his character as a Roman citizen insulted and disgraced; and in some affecting verses spoken on the occasion, he incensed the audience against the tyrant, by whose mandate he was obliged to

curium reliquorum carere, sed etiam tribu moveri notatione censoria voluerunt. Præelara sane, et Romanis laudibus annumeranda prudentia. Ecce enim recte quisquis civium Romanorum esse scenicus eligisset, non solum ei nullus ad honorem dabatur locus, verum etiam censoris nota tribum tenere propriam minime sinebatur. O animum civitatis laudis avidum, Germaneque Romanum, &c. Romani vero hominibus scenicis nec plebeam tribum, quanto minus senatoriam curiam dehonestari sinunt." *Aug. De Civitate*.—Tacitus relates, "Variis deinde et sæpius inritis prætorum questibus, postremo Cæsar de immodestia histrionum retulit. Multa ab iis in publicum seditiose, fæda per domos tentari. Oscum quendam ludicrum lævisimè apud vulgum oblectationis, eo flagitiorum ac virium venisse, ut auctoritate Patrum coercendum sit, pulsatum Italia histriones." *Annalium, lib. 4, cap. 3.*

appear before them. "After having lived (said he) sixty years with honour, I left my house this morning a Roman knight, but shall return to it this evening an INFAMOUS STAGE PLAYER. Alas! I have lived a day too long!" It is impossible to entertain respect for a player; and there is not a family of any consideration in Britain, which would not count it a disgrace if any of its members were to embrace so frivolous and disreputable a profession.

It may not be improper to inquire, on what this almost universal prejudice is founded. The common sense of mankind is seldom, perhaps, never wrong; what all concur to disapprove must be liable to serious objections. The reasons which render the profession of an actor contemptible, are so conspicuously and dispassionately stated by Dr. Witherspoon, that, together with my respect for the memory of the author, and the consciousness that it is not in my power to do the subject so much justice in other

words, I am induced to quote a page or two of his admirable Letter respecting Playactors.

“First, All powers and talents whatever, though excellent in themselves, when they are applied to the single purpose of amusing the idle, vain, or vicious parts of society, become contemptible.

“There is not upon record among the sayings of bold men, one more remarkable than that of Sobrius, the tribune, to Nero, the Roman emperor ;\* when asked by the emperor, why he, who was one of his personal guards, had conspired against him ? he answered, “I loved you as much as any man, as long as you deserved to be loved, but I began to hate you, when, after the murder of your wife and mother, you became a charioteer, a COMEDIAN, and a buffoon.” I am sensible, that in this reasoning, I consider theatrical pieces, properly speaking, as intended for amusement, I am

\* Even Nero himself was at last induced to exile all Stage players out of his dominions, assigning as a reason, that they were enemies to the public good !

not however ignorant, that some have dignified them with the character of schools or lessons of morality.

“But, as they have been generally called, and are still called by many writers, **AMUSEMENTS**, so I am confident everybody must perceive, that this was their original purpose, and will be their capital and their principal effect. It seems to me of consequence in this argument to observe, that what is true of theatrical exhibitions, is true of every other effect of human genius or art; when applied to the purposes of amusement and folly, they become contemptible. Of all external accomplishments, there is none that has been for many ages held in greater esteem than good horsemanship. It has been said, that the human form never appears with greater dignity than when a handsome man appears on horseback, with proper and elegant management of that noble creature. Yet when men employ themselves, in singular and whimsical feats, standing instead of riding upon a horse at full gallop, or upon two horses at once, or other



feats of the like nature, in order to amuse the vain, and gather money from the foolish, it immediately appears contemptible. And, for my own part, I would no more hold communication with a master of the circus than a manager of the Theatre. And I should be sorry to be thought to have any intimacy with either the one or the other.

“ The general observation which I have made applies to all human arts of every kind and class. Music has always been esteemed one of the finest arts, and was originally used in the worship of God, and the praise of heroes. Yet, when music is applied to the purposes of amusement only, it becomes wholly contemptible. And I believe the public performers, from the men-singers and women-singers of Solomon, to the singers in the present Theatres, are considered as in a disgraceful employment. I am happy to have even Lord Chesterfield on Politeness, for my assistant in this cause : for though he acknowledges music to be one of the fine arts, yet he thinks to be too great a connoisseur, and to be always fiddling and playing,

is not consistent with the character of a gentleman.

“ In the second place, as players have been generally persons of loose morals, so their employment directly leads to the corruption of the heart. It is an allowed principle among critics, that no human passion or character can be well represented unless it be felt: this they call entering into the spirit of the part. Now I suppose the following philosophical remark is equally certain, that every human passion, especially when strongly felt, gives a certain modification to the blood and spirits, and makes the whole frame more susceptible of its return. Therefore, whoever has justly and strongly acted human passions that are vicious, will be more prone to these same passions; and indeed, with respect to the whole character, they will soon be in reality what they have so often seemed to be.\*

\* “ *Talis homini est oratio qualis vita. Argumentum est luxuriæ publicæ orationis lascivia. Non potest alius esse ingenio, alius animo color. Illo vitiato, hoc quoque afflatur.*” — *Seneca, Epist. 114.*

“ This applies to the whole extent of theatrical representation. Whoever has acted the part of a proud or revengeful person, I should not like to fall in his way when offended : and if any man has often acted the part of a rogue or deceiver, I should not be willing to trust him with my money. It may either be added as another remark, or considered as a further illustration of the one last made, that players by so frequently appearing in an assumed character, lose all character of their own. ‘ Nothing,’ says an eminent and learned writer, ‘ is more awkward and insipid, than a player out of the line of his own profession.’ And, indeed, what must that memory and brain be, where the constant business of its possessor is to obliterate one scene or system of folly, only to make way for another.

“ In the third place, I cannot help thinking it is of some moment to observe, that players, in consequence of their profession, appearing continually in an assumed character, or being employed in preparing to assume it, must lose all sense of sincerity and truth. Truth is so

sacred a thing, that even the least violation of it is not without its degree of guilt and danger. It was far from being so absurd, as it often has been said to be, what the old Spartan answered to an Athenian who spoke to him of the fine lessons found in their tragedies ;—‘ I think I could learn virtue much better from our own rules of truth and justice, than by hearing your lies.’

“ I will here observe, that some very able and judicious persons have given it as a serious and important advice to young persons, to guard against mimicking and taking off others, as it is called, in language, voice, and gesture, —because it tends to destroy the simplicity and dignity of personal manners and behaviour. I myself, in early life, knew a young man of good talents, who absolutely unfitted himself for public speaking by this practice. He was educated for the ministry, and was in every respect well qualified for the office ; but having without suspicion frequently amused himself and others by imitating the tones and gestures of the most eminent preachers of the city

where he lived, when he began to preach himself, he could not avoid falling into one or other of those tones which he had so often mimicked. This, as soon as it was perceived, threw the audience into a burst of laughter, and he was soon obliged to quit the profession altogether, for no other reason than that he had thus spoiled himself by the talent of imitation. I may say further, in support of this remark, that I have known no instance of one eminent for mimicking, who did not in time make himself contemptible.

“But the human passion that makes the most conspicuous figure in the Theatre, is LOVE. A play without intrigue and gallantry would be no play at all. This passion is, of all others, that which has produced the greatest degree of guilt and misery in the history of mankind. Now is it, or can it be denied, that actors in the Theatre are trained up in the knowledge and exercise of this passion in all its forms? It seems to have been a sentiment of this kind that led a certain author to say, that to send young people to the Theatre to

form their manners, is to expect that they will learn virtue from profligates, and modesty from harlots.”\*

\* Rousseau will not be accused of entertaining very strict puritanical notions, yet he has thus depicted the lives of players ; and I am sorry to observe that, with a very few singular exceptions, what he has written is a genuine portrait of this description of persons in every age and country :—

“To begin with facts, before we reason on their cause ; I find, in general, that the profession of a comedian is a state of immorality and licentiousness ; that the players of both sexes lead debauched and scandalous lives ; that they are at once prodigal and avaricious ; constantly involved in debt and extravagance ; careless in spending their money, and little scrupulous as to their manner of getting it. I find also, that in all countries their profession is disreputable ; that those who follow it, whether excommunicated or not, are universally despised.”

Of actresses, he remarks,—“ I ask, How is it possible for a profession, whose only object is to appear in public, and, what is worse, to appear for money, to be suitable to virtuous women, and to be compatible with modesty and good manners ? Need one enter into any dispute about the moral difference of the sexes, to be

As then the profession of an actor is so ignominious, and as it has uniformly debased

convinced how natural it must be for a woman, who exposes her person for money on the Stage, to be ready to do it elsewhere ; and to be tempted to gratify those desires which she takes so much pains to excite ? Shall a prudent woman, who makes use of a thousand precautions to secure her virtue, find it difficult, after all, to preserve her innocence, when she is exposed to the least danger ? And shall these forward girls, who have no other education than what they learn from lessons of coquetry and amours ; whose dress is not the most decent, and who are constantly solicited by libertines, amidst the seductive sounds of love and pleasure ;—shall these girls, I say, be able to resist, at their age and with their disposition, the ensnaring objects which surround them—the alluring discourse addressed to them—the opportunities and importunities continually presenting themselves—and, above all, that gold, to which their hearts are already devoted ? Surely we must be thought to be simple as children to be thus imposed on ! Vice endeavours in vain to conceal itself ; its image is stampd on the countenance of the guilty. The impudence of a woman is a sure mark of her infamy ; it is because she has too much reason to blush that she ceases to blush

the human character, what virtuous mind will contribute to the support of a class of men so

any longer ; and, though shame may sometimes survive chastity, what must we think of chastity where shame itself is gone ? ”

The following quotation is from the *Examiner Newspaper*, of the 18th of December, 1814 ; the editors of which are some of the firmest, and, to do them justice, the most intelligent and able champions which the Stage can boast. Under the head “*Theatrical Examiner*,” they enter their indignant protest against the manner in which female actresses are treated in their professional capacity :—

“We notice,” say they, “the after-piece of the *Ninth Statue* merely as an occasion of making a few remarks on a subject which has often considerably annoyed us,—we mean, the manner in which females are treated on the Stage. We are not such Vandals or Puritans as to wish to rob the Theatre of its chief interest and beauty, the assistance of women performers ; but we do hold it very ‘stuff o’ the conscience,’ that the Ladies who thus come forward to contribute to our entertainment should be subjected to humiliations which degrade at once their sex and their understanding. We are not surprised that a good actress so seldom appears : painful indeed must it be to any



miserable, and whose very employment must render them contemptible ?

woman of cultivated mind and delicate feelings, to be night after night the gaze of a miscellaneous mob, to be hissed by an apprentice from Whitechapel, or to have her form criticised limb by limb by a gloating libertine from St. James's. The condition of women is, in all branches of society, sufficiently pitiable, educated as they are solely for pleasure, and contemptuously nourished with flattery instead of truth. Even the wise and good among men, notwithstanding all their contrary professions, consider them either as charming playthings or beautiful exhibitions: our very indulgences imply an insulting superiority, and our love itself is not unmixed with ideas of their imbecility. Nay, perhaps, this very appeal, which we are now making in their behalf, may be construed into a presumptuous ostentation of protection exercised towards an inferior class of creatures. We are utterly unconscious of such a feeling: we not only look upon women as decidedly the most loveable part of creation, but we are perfectly assured that in the daily duties of social life they display qualities more useful and more estimable than those of the best men: they are less shaken by calamity, they are more constant in their regards, they are more firm to their

SHUTER, whose facetious powers convulsed whole audiences with laughter, and whose

principles, having more taste for virtue, and infinitely less disturbance from passion : their kindness is an instinct ever fresh as nature itself, and their magnanimity of devotedness is as regular as it is certain. Now is it right, is it fitting that such beings should be compelled to situations which must eventually destroy all traces of that estimation for them, which is naturally their due? We have been led to make these observations from witnessing the merciless manner in which the Manager of Drury-Lane has lately assaulted the delicacy of Miss Kelly. It seems to have been the particular object of the pantomime and farce-makers to contrive to put her continually in such situations as a woman of intelligent feeling must shrink from with shuddering abhorrence ; but the *Ninth Statue* has furnished the very climax of outrage. First, she is a lady in a Sultan's seraglio—then she runs all over the world with the said Sultan, in the disguise of his page—then she is thrust up through a trap-door and stuck on a pedestal—then she is lifted from the said pedestal by the arm of the Sultan, flung round her waist—then she is carried along on his shoulder, like a murdered stag round the neck of a deer stealer—then she is heaved on the ground, like the sack of a miller—then

companionable qualities often "set the table in a roar," was a miserable being. The following anecdote, told from the best authority, will confirm this assertion; and I am afraid,

the said Sultan pulls about one arm, then another, then twists her round like a tetotum, and at last takes manual possession of her whole person. We know Miss Kelly to be a woman of talent—we firmly believe her to be possessed of considerable sensibility: how then does the Manager deserve to be reprobated who can so expose a respectable actress, thus lacerating her feelings, and violating in her person that delicacy which is the greatest female charm? We can conceive Miss Kelly, after such an exhibition, rushing to her room, and reluctant to lift up her eyes even to hail her nearest friends. Such, at least, would be the feeling of a woman of pure mind, and we have no doubt that she is such a woman; if it be otherwise it is not our fault, but hers. At any rate, our general argument will remain unshaken."

Does not the whole of this extract support the argument maintained in the text? Read the playbills of the last ten years, especially those which announce the performances at the Theatre in Wych-street; and how disgusting is the view they give us of the voluntary degradation of actresses!

were we acquainted with many of his profession, we should find that his case is by no means singular. Shuter had heard Mr. Whitefield, and trembled with apprehension of a judgment to come; he had also frequently heard Mr. Kinsman, and sometimes called on him in London. One day, accidentally meeting him in Plymouth, after some years of separation, he embraced him with rapture, and inquired if that was the place of his residence? Mr. Kinsman replied, "Yes, but I am just returned from London, where I have preached so often and to such large auditories, and have been so indisposed, that Dr. Fothergill advised my immediate return to the country for change of air." "And I," said Shuter, "have been acting Sir John Falstaff so often, that I thought I should have died, and the physicians advised me to come into the country for the benefit of the air. Had you died, it would have been in serving the best of Masters; but had I, it would have been in the service of the devil. Oh, sir, do you think I shall ever be called again? I certainly was once, and if

Mr. Whitefield had let me come to the Lord's-table with him, I never should have gone back again. But the caresses of the great are exceedingly ensnaring. My Lord E—— sent for me to-day, and I was glad I could not go. Poor things ! they are unhappy, and they want Shuter to make them laugh. But O, sir, such a life as yours !—as soon as I leave you, I shall be King Richard. This is what they call a good play, as good as some sermons. I acknowledge there are some striking and moral things in it ; but after it I shall come in again with my farce of a 'Dish of all Sorts,' and knock all that on the head. Fine reformers we !" Poor Shuter, once more thou wilt be an object of sport to the frivolous children of dissipation, who will now laugh at thee, not for thy drollery, but thy seriousness ; and this story, probably, will be urged against thee as the weakness of a noble mind ; weakness let it be called, but in spite of himself man must be serious at last. And when a player awakes to sober reflection, how great must be his mental anguish ! Let those auditories which

the comic performer has convulsed with laughter, witness a scene in which the actor retires and the man appears ; let them behold him in the agonies of death, looking back with horror on a life of guilt, while despair is mingled with forebodings of the future. Players have no leisure to learn to die ; and if a serious thought wander into the mind, the painful sigh which it excites is suppressed, and with an awful desperation, the wretched creature rushes into company to be delivered from himself. A more careless, a more unreflecting being than a player, cannot exist ; for if an intense impression of the dignity of reason, the importance of character, and future responsibility be once felt, he can be a player no longer.

Upon what principles then of Christianity, or of moral obligation, can I hire an individual to prostitute his talents and his life to that which must render him infamous and wretched, and which, with respect to myself and family, I should esteem a reproach and a serious calamity ? Benevolence, the great law of uni-

versal equity, the welfare of society, of which players are the pest, call upon us in an imperious tone, to relinquish an amusement which demands the sacrifice of so many human victims.

We have shuddered at the barbarous cruelty of the Indian tribes, when to appease their gods, they have cherished devotion with the warm blood of humanity ; and when we have seen the horrid libation poured out to their execrable deities, our hearts have bled with compassion. But are we not chargeable with an enormity much more shocking, when we erect the Stage as an altar, and immolate to the god of pleasure the talents, the morals, the eternal happiness of so many immortal beings ? —It is true, we endeavour to invest our heroes of the boards with posthumous renown, by raising monuments to their fame in the cloistered abbey ; but could Garrick rise from the tomb, with what indignation would he trample into dust the marble that perpetuates his disgrace !

No man presents a stronger proof of the

baneful influence of the profession of an actor on character than David Garrick. This Roscius of his day, this universal favourite, what is the moral estimation in which he is held? What advantages have society derived from the exercise of his talents? What would the world have been injured if he had never lived, and what was the loss it sustained when he died? Take a man of equal celebrity from any of the honourable departments of life, either a lawyer, a divine, or a man of literature, and compare him with Garrick. Read together the memoirs of their lives, and you will find that the actor degraded the man; and that a comparison of him with a fellow-being of equal talents and equal fame in another profession, is infinitely to his disadvantage.

When Johnson and Garrick launched forth together on the ocean of life, their condition was the same. "Unknowing and unknown," they had each a character to form and reputation to acquire. And now they have gained the port, and live but in the sentiments



of mankind, let us view the memorial with which their names are handed down to posterity. Garrick lived a trifle,—never was a life more barren of incidents which reflect honour on human nature than his,—a moral lesson never fell from his lips. In a prologue, he even ridiculed Dr. Young for wishing to appropriate the profits of his play to the spread of the Gospel. Under opposition, he was fretful and malicious;—in prosperity, he appeared a compound of arrogance, envy, and vanity. He is known but by his biographer; and I think no man who reads his life will say, “I wish I had been Garrick!” Johnson, on the contrary, will be remembered and revered to the latest posterity. There is indeed a ruggedness in his character, a sort of repellent quality, that rendered him not very amiable in the drawing-room; but this moroseness, if it may be called by so harsh a name, in a great measure proceeded from his circumstances. Let us represent to ourselves Johnson, the greatest of human beings, struggling with poverty, encountering difficulties, and often de-

pending for the next meal on the resources of his own talents, or the precarious humours of unfeeling booksellers, and we shall not be surprised that his character was deeply tinctured with something which certainly does not resemble the milk of human kindness;\* but with all his failings, the conversation of Johnson was always interesting, always instructive; he was the friend of religion, and drew his sublime morality from this its purest source. He and Garrick lived for the public; but the one was its creature—its ape—its mimic; while the

\* I have endeavoured, in the delineation of the character of this great man, (says one of his biographers,) with equal care to avoid the extremes of praise and blame; I trust to the charity, the gratitude, and the justice of impartial posterity, that the failings of a man, whose whole life was a conflict of pain and adversity, will either be forgiven or forgotten; and that the remembrance of his virtues, and a reverence for the wonderful endowments of his mind, and his zeal in the employment of them to the best of purposes, will be coeval with those excellent lessons of religion, morality, and economical wisdom which he has left behind him.

other enriched it with lessons of wisdom, and incited it to virtue by the persuasives of eloquence, aided by sincerity in the cause.

Johnson's best eulogium is his works, which will be read with admiration as long as taste, literature, and virtue are preserved among men. There is this difference in the feelings of a person who reads the lives of Garrick and Johnson—Garrick we pity, Johnson we admire ; with Garrick, we are often disgusted and mortified ; the more we know of Johnson, the more we desire to learn. In closing the last volume of Garrick's memoirs, we sigh and say, " This man lived in vain !" but, as we draw on to the evening of Johnson's life, it is with sad reluctance ; we think not even Boswell tedious ; we would protract the history ; and when we are forced to shut the volume, it is with this conviction, " It is happy for the world that Johnson lived !"

Having introduced Dr. Johnson on this subject, as a contrast to Garrick, to show the pernicious influence of the Stage on the character of a player of eminent talents in his profession,

it may not be amiss to inquire what ideas our great moralist entertained of the employment. In his life of Savage, he speaks of the condition of an actor as that which makes almost "every man, for whatever reason, contemptuous, insolent, petulant, selfish, and brutal." That there have been a few exceptions to this who have retained a virtuous character, notwithstanding all the temptations and blandishments of the profession, is no argument against this general, notorious fact. In a town infected with the plague, an individual or two may have escaped the contagion; but who would welcome the pestilence into their neighbourhood, because it has not been universally destructive? or who would seriously argue, that because some constitutions have withstood its power, that it is therefore harmless?

The argument against the Theatre, drawn from the general character of players, will, I am aware, have little influence on those who would sacrifice the human race if it could administer to their pleasure; to propose such an argument to them, they will say, betrays the

most arrant fanaticism. Those who could deride a WILBERFORCE for his noble exertions to effect the abolition of the slave trade, because luxury demanded its continuance, will laugh too at the attempt which would restore the degraded player to the dignity of a human being, by destroying a profession which, though it has made him infamous, affords amusement and pleasure to the fashionable and the gay.

But perhaps it may be urged, that the man who commences actor does it from choice, and that the degradation is on his part voluntary. But is not female prostitution voluntary likewise? And is not that man guilty of a breach of moral obligation, is he not an enemy to society, who supports a prostitute? That a player voluntarily embraces a profession that sinks him into contempt, is a proof of his degeneracy. But are we to be partakers of other men's sins? Because there was a wretch like Hubert to be found, was the murderer John less criminal, when he employed him to assassinate the infant prince, of whom he should have been the protector, the guardian, the friend?

Pretended benevolence, I know, may still plead for a Theatre, under the idea that players are fit for nothing else: that disgust at the sober and honourable occupations of life, and a moral inability to discharge its duties, together with a love of vanity, and an eager desire of applause, first led them to tread the boards; that persons of this description are only qualified to be the menial servants of the public; and that if we take away from them figure, gesture, enunciation, and the power of memory, there is "*Preterea nihil.*" There would be indeed some weight in this consideration, if the disease which afflicts the moral constitution of these poor creatures were not contagious; if it did not infect others, and contribute to enlarge the sphere of vice and misery. Could we convert the Theatre into a sort of Bedlam, and not suffer these raging children of passion and folly to propagate their wretchedness, we might gratify the best feelings of the heart, and indulge a compassion which reason and humanity would justify.

There is another argument on which some

persons lay great stress, and which I am afraid will render all the former reasoning against players and the Theatre ineffectual ; and that is, if general patronage be withdrawn from the Stage, it must sink, and people of fashion will be deprived of the most productive topic of conversation. Deduct from fashionable discourse the last night's play, Macready's attitudes, and the affected tragic strutting of Charles Kean, and what remains? If the Theatre did not kindly relieve the embarrassments arising from the want of subjects to talk of in many circles, after the bow and the stare, they would have nothing to do but to bow again and retire. We must have players, that those things called Beaus and Belles may not be reduced to mere automata, or given up to dismal ennui. The happiness of so important a part of society ought surely to induce hesitation before we rashly and barbarously propose the abolition of the Stage.

To one who views the Theatre, and its admirers, in the same degrading light, this is a consideration of little moment ; and such an

one will not even now be convinced that players should sacrifice the dignity of human nature, and every thing that is dear to man, to compliment the unidea'd people of the world. It is indeed the province of the unhappy individuals themselves to decide on this. But it should be the determination of every friend of humanity to leave the support of the Theatre to those who derive from it this only advantage which it can possibly yield.

In addition to what has been already written on the pernicious and destructive influence of the Stage, the AUDIENCE which it usually attracts, is an argument which should be seriously weighed. I cannot help considering the Theatre in this view, as the enchanted ground of iniquity; it is here that vice lifts up its head with undaunted courage; that the most licentious and abandoned females endeavour, by meretricious ornament, and every art which lascivious wantonness can invent, to allure the young and inconsiderate, who, with passions enkindled by what is passing on the Stage, are thrown off their guard, and thus



fatally prepared to fall the victims of seduction. The avenues to the Theatres, the box-lobby, and many of the most conspicuous places in it, are filled with women of this description. On the stage there is every thing to excite improper ideas in the mind, and in the audience every thing to gratify them. The emotion is soon inflamed to a passion; reason quickly yields to its powerful empire, and ruin is too often the fatal consequence.

I know it is by no means unusual to condemn this mode of reasoning as inconclusive. It has been said, that temptations to vice are to be found every where, and that the Church is as dangerous in this respect as the Theatre. This however is not true. Temptations are nowhere armed with such power as at the Play-house. That the abomination of desolation sometimes intrudes into the holy place, and pollutes the sanctuary, is an acknowledged truth. But is there not in a place of worship every thing to check unhallowed passions, and to counteract the influence of vice in its most seductive forms? At the house of prayer we have heard

of infamous women, who came to scoff, shrinking with horror, and trembling with apprehension; and, instead of seducing others, they have been themselves reclaimed. But the Theatre, by its own proper influence, and the coinciding influence of accidental evil in the audience, has made a thousand male and female prostitutes; while at Church, there perhaps was never a youth of UNTAINTED morals who fell into the snare of female profligacy. They are not men of virtue who are seduced at Church:—that man must have been PRACTISED in iniquity who could suffer himself to be led astray from before the altar: but a youth hitherto innocent and uncontaminated may fall an easy victim at the Theatre. The sighs and tears of many wretched parents, whose children have been swallowed up in this vortex of dissipation, are in the place of a thousand arguments against the destructive tendency of a Theatre, and a theatrical audience.

Sir John Hawkins, in his *Life of Johnson*, has a remark which strikingly illustrates what I have now advanced. “Although it is said

of plays, that they teach morality; and of the Stage, that it is the mirror of human life: these assertions are mere declamation, and have no foundation in truth or experience; on the contrary, a Playhouse, and the regions about it, are the very hot-beds of vice. How else comes it to pass, that no sooner is a Playhouse opened in any part of the kingdom, than it becomes surrounded by an halo of brothels? Of this truth the neighbourhood of the place I am now speaking of (Goodman's Fields Theatre) has had experience; one parish alone, adjacent thereto, having, to my knowledge, expended the sum of £1300 in prosecutions, for the purpose of removing those inhabitants whom, for instruction in the science of human life, the Playhouse had drawn thither."

Let the contents of this chapter, and their agreement with facts, be seriously examined and dispassionately considered, and I have no doubt but that every impartial mind will justify the conclusion to which I am brought—that the Stage is evil, only evil, and that the wel-

fare of society, and the happiness of the world, call loudly for its abolition. But as this cannot be expected in the present state of things, the wise and the virtuous should at least discountenance it, both by their influence and example.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE CHARACTER OF THE STAGE, AS DRAWN BY  
HISTORIANS, PHILOSOPHERS, LEGISLATORS,  
AND DIVINES.

COULD I summon into one interesting group the venerable men who have, in every age, instructed and admonished the world by their wisdom and their virtue, and collect their aggregate opinion on the character and moral influence of the Stage, the decision, were it uniform, would demand some consideration; and from it Presumption itself would not venture to appeal. But this is not practicable, nor is it necessary; their sentiments on this subject are upon record. There is scarcely a distinguished name among the philosophers, legislators, and moralists of the world but is hostile to the Theatre; and they have left, by their historians, or in their writings, an im-

perishable monument inscribed with their protest against the Stage.

“It is an invariable fact in the history of all nations,” says Clement, “a fact which has been carefully recorded by historians, that the refinement and increase of public spectacles has essentially contributed to that universal depravation of public and private morality, which has almost always been either the secret or obvious cause of the fall of empires.” “What caused the ruin of the flourishing republic of Greece? Ask the wisest of her philosophers, ask the most eloquent of her orators—the Games, the Theatres; these excited a fondness for the magnificent and marvellous, and a disgust for simplicity and propriety. It was complained that the magistrates and people neglected the care of public affairs; the young men abandoned their salutary exercises to frequent the Theatres; the indolence and effeminacy of one sex produced delicacy and morbid sensibility in the other, and the dissoluteness of Greece became a proverb in history.”\*

\* Vide Justin, lib. 6.

Augustine beautifully remarks, that “*Theatrica artes virtus Romana non noverat.*” “But,” observes a Roman author, “when conquered Greece taught her this fatal art, she taught her, at the same time, all her vices. The wisest of the Romans foresaw this: he had strenuously opposed the establishment of a regular Theatre, asserting, that it would be to Rome a more dangerous Carthage than that which they had just destroyed. He then succeeded in his opposition, but unfortunately he succeeded but for a short time; and the event showed that Cato was not deceived.” Livy unites his testimony with that of Justin, and condemns the Theatre. Philosophers follow in the same train.\* “Plays,” says Plato, “raise the passions, and pervert the use of them, and are of course dangerous to morality.” Again: “The

\* The following quotations from *Ovid* will, perhaps, have greater weight with some readers than the sage counsels of Philosophers and Divines. When he recommends the pursuits of illicit pleasure, he urges an attendance at the Theatre; and when he would quench the unhallowed fire he had laboured to kindle, he de-

diversions of the Stage are dangerous to temper and sobriety; they swell anger and desire too

nounces the Stage as the worst enemy of returning virtue:—

“Sed tu præcipue curvis venare theatris:

Hæc loca sunt votis fertiliora tuis.

Illic invenies, quod ames; quod ludere possis;

Quodque semel tangas, quodque tenere velis.

Ut redit, itque frequens longum formica per agmen,

Granifero solitum dum vehit ore cibum; &c.

Sic ruit in celebres cultissima foemina ludos;

Copia judicium sæpe morata meum est.

Spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsæ;

Ille locus casti damna pudoris habet.

Primus sollicitos fecisti, Romule, ludos,

Cum juvit viduos rapta Sabina viros, &c.

In gradibus sedit populus de cespite factis;

Qualibet hirsutas fronde tegente comas.

Respiciunt, oculisque notant sibi quisque puellam,

Quam velit, et tacito pectore multa movent.

Dumque, rudem præbente modum tibicine Thusco,

Lydius æquatam ter pede pulsat humum; &c.

Protinus exiliunt, animum clamore fatentes;

Virginibus cupidas injiciuntque manus, &c.

Romule, militibus scisti dare commoda, solus

Hæc mihi si dederis commoda, miles ero



much. Tragedy is apt to make men boisterous, and comedy buffoons. Those passions are che-

Scilicet ex illo solennia more Theatra,  
Nunc quoque formosis insidiosa manent."

*De Arte Amandi, Lib. I. p. 215. Anno Dom. 1735.—  
London Edit.*

Let parents and husbands attend to the following lines :—

" Quid faciet custos ? Cum sint tot in urbe Theatra :  
Cum spectet junctos illa libenter equos :  
Cum sedeat Phariæ sacris operata juvencæ ;  
Quoque sui comites ire vetantur, eat."

*De Arte Amandi, Lib. III. p. 271.*

In his " De Remedio Amoris," this writer advises all who would return to a life of chastity, to withdraw themselves from the Theatre, to relinquish the habit of perusing plays and amorous poetry, especially that of Tibullus, and even his own :—

" At tanti tibi sit non indulgere Theatris ;  
Dum bene de vacuo pectore cedat amor.  
Enervant animos citharæ, cantusque, lyreque,  
Et vox et numeris brachia mota suis.

rished which ought to be checked : Virtue loses ground, and Reason grows precarious: Vice makes an insensible approach, and steals upon us in the disguise of pleasure." Legislators have

*Illic assidue ficti cantantur amantes ;*

*Quid caveas, actor, quid juvet, arte docet.*

*Eloquar invitus : teneros ne tange Poetas ;*

*Submoveo dotes impius ipse meas.*

*Callimachum fugito : non est inimicus amori :*

*Et cum Callimacho tu quoque Coë, noces, etc.*

*Carmina quis potuit tuto legisse Tibulli ?*

*Vel tua, cujus opus Cynthia sola fuit ?*

*Quis potuit lecto durus discedere Gallo ?*

*Et mea nescio quid carmina tale sonant."*

*Lib. II. p. 296.*

Ovid carries his detestation of Theatres so far, that he styles them—the seminaries of all wickedness ; and entreats Augustus to abolish them for ever.

*" Ut tamen hoc fatear : ludi quoque semina præbent*

*Nequitæ ; tolli tota Theatra jube*

*Peccandi causam quam multi sæpe dederunt :*

*Martia cum durum sternit arena solum ?*

*Tollatur Circus, non tuta licentia circi est :*

*Hic sedet ignoto juncta puella viro.*

joined their protest to historians and philosophers. The wisest legislators of Greece and Rome did their utmost to damp a theatrical spirit, but in vain. Thespis, the first improver of the Dramatic art, lived in the time of Solon; "That wise legislator," says Rollin, "upon seeing his pieces performed, expressed his dislike by striking his staff against the ground."

I might fatigue the reader with quotations from names of the most distinguished eminence: it would be tedious, it would be useless. It is enough to remark, that Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Solon and Cato, Seneca and Tacitus, the most venerable men of antiquity—a constellation of talents

Cum quædam spatientur in hac, ut amator eodem  
Conveniat: quare porticus ulla patet?

\* \* \* \* \*

Omnia perversas possunt corrumpere mentes."

*Tristrium, Lib. II. Ad Aug. Cæsarem.*

Could the sternest Puritan, Methodist, or Calvinist, as the term now is, have expressed himself with greater force in opposition to the Stage, as a school of depravity, than this profane heathen poet?

and virtues, the greatest that ever shone—have all condemned the Stage. We may add to these the Fathers of the Church.\*

Augustine confesses with a noble frankness worthy of a true penitent, that at the Theatre he imbibed all the venom which corrupted his

\* William Prynne, whose name is dear to Protestantism, and who suffered fines, imprisonments, and the loss of his ears in the merciful and tolerant reign of that blessed martyr, King Charles the First, both for what he wrote and what he did not write, and whose only crimes were the speculative opinions he entertained on the subject of religion, and a life in strict conformity to the pure morality of the Gospel, in his *Histrio Mastix*, (in more respects than one a very formidable volume,) has made a catalogue of authorities against the Stage, which contains every name of eminence in the heathen and Christian worlds: it comprehends the united testimony of the Jewish and Christian Churches; the deliberate acts of fifty-four ancient and modern general national provincial councils, and synods, both of the Western and Eastern Churches; the condemnatory sentences of seventy-one ancient fathers, and one hundred and fifty modern Popish and Protestant authors; the hostile endeavours of philosophers, and even of poets; with the legislative enactments of a

heart. "Yes," said Tertullian, "I will grant that your theatrical representations are simple, fascinating, and even respectable : but does he who prepares a poisonous draught mix gall and wormwood in the bowl ? No ; he conceals its deadly qualities by infusing sweet and aromatic ingredients." "Even," observes St. Augustine, "if there were no other objections to the Theatre than the public intercourse of the sexes, not to speak of the criminal behaviour of women utterly destitute of modesty, who seek, by their languishing gestures, their pe-

great number of pagan and Christian states, nations, magistrates, emperors and princes. It appears among the latter that many who at first gave countenance and support to these pernicious amusements, were forced to abolish them with the most unrelenting severity. It is said that the English are not a theatrical people ; and if the instructive and impressive experience of ages and generations is to be regarded, how criminal must those individuals be, who are labouring from week to week to excite and cherish in this nation a taste for those vain and effeminate pursuits, which never fail, sooner or later, to bring ruin upon those countries where they have been suffered to prevail ! .

netrating voices, their empoisoned action, to inflame, to consume you with the fierceness of desire : not to urge this, were there no other objection to the Theatre than the sight of a sex always dangerous, but then still more so, when their charms are improved by every ornament that taste and luxury can invent ; alas ! even then it would be the surest snare of innocence." Miss Baillie, a modern writer of most admirable talents, though she does not absolutely condemn the Stage, is constrained, as a moralist, to enter her protest against busy, that is, fashionable comedy : "The moral tendency of it," she observes, "is very faulty ; that mockery of age and domestic authority, so constantly held forth, has a very bad effect upon the younger part of an audience, and that continual lying and deceit in the first characters of the piece, which is necessary for conducting the plot, has a most pernicious one."

Archbishop Tillotson, in reprobating the conduct of certain parents, employs this very strong language : from any other pen it would be condemned as the sourest Puritanism :—

“They are such monsters, I had almost said devils, as not to know how to give good things to their children. Instead of bringing them to God’s church, they bring them to the devil’s chapels, to play-houses and places of debauchery—those schools and nurseries of lewdness and vice.”

From Collier,\* whose Treatise on the Stage is more known than read, I shall make no direct quotation; and I merely introduce his name in this place for the purpose of refuting the assertion of the Annual Review, already referred to in a former chapter, namely, that “Collier aped the anger of the ancients with-

\* It is fashionable to stigmatize this writer as a sour Puritan; with what propriety, will be evident from a perusal of the following remarks of Johnson:—“Collier, a fierce and implacable nonjuror, knew that an attack upon the Theatre would never make him suspected for a Puritan; he therefore published ‘A short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage;’ I believe with no other motive than religious zeal and honest indignation. He was formed for a controvertist; with sufficient learning; with diction vehement and pointed, though often vulgar and *incorrect*; with unconquerable pertinacity; with wit

out their provocation." If Collier was angry without provocation, a virtuous mind may pass through the most nauseous scenes of impurity which are to be found in the metropolis, with calm unruffled composure. On this subject I will call to my assistance three auxiliaries, men

in the highest degree keen and sarcastic; and with all those powers exalted and invigorated by just confidence in his cause." As a specimen of his style and manner, I will furnish the reader with the concluding paragraph of his preface to the "Short View:"—"There is one thing to acquaint the reader with; 'tis, that I have ventured to change the terms of mistress and lover for others somewhat more plain, but much more proper. I don't look upon this as any failure in civility. As good and evil are different in themselves, so they ought to be differently marked. To confound them in speech is the way to confound them in practice. Ill qualities ought to have ill names to prevent their being catching. Indeed *things* are, in a great measure, governed by *words*; to gild over a foul character serves only to perplex the idea, to encourage the bad, and mislead the unwary. To treat honour and infamy alike is an injury to virtue, and a sort of levelling in morality. I confess I have no ceremony for debauchery, for to compliment vice is but one remove from worshipping the devil."



I imagine quite as creditable for knowledge and talents as this zealous advocate of the Stage—Dr. Johnson, Lord Kaimes, and Mr. Cumberland : each testifies that Collier was not angry without provocation. Speaking of Collier's attack on the Stage, Johnson remarks, " His onset was violent ; those passages which, while they stood single, had passed with little notice, when they were accumulated and exposed together, excited horror ; the wise and the pious caught the alarm, and the nation wondered why it had so long suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be openly taught at the public charge."

Lord Kaimes, referring to the age of Collier, has ventured the following observations, and they are strikingly in point :—" The licentious court of Charles the Second, among its many disorders, engendered a pest, the virulence of which subsists to this day. The English comedy, copying the manners of the court, became extremely licentious, and continues so with very little softening. It is there an established rule to deck out the chief characters with every vice in fashion, however gross. But as such characters, viewed in a true light,

would be disgusting, care is taken to disguise their deformity under the embellishments of wit, sprightliness, and good humour, which, in mixed company, make a capital figure. It requires not time nor much thought to discover the poisonous influence of such plays. A young man of figure, emancipated at last from the severity and restraint of a college education, repairs to the capital, disposed to every sort of excess. The playhouse becomes his favourite amusement; and he is enchanted with the gaiety and splendour of the chief personages. The disgust which vice gives him at first soon wears off, to make way for new notions, more liberal in his opinion; by which a sovereign contempt of religion, and a declared war upon the chastity of wives, maids, and widows, are converted from being infamous vices, to be fashionable virtues. The infection spreads gradually through all ranks, and becomes universal. How gladly would I listen to any one who would undertake to prove that what I have been describing is chimerical! But the dissoluteness of our young people of birth will not suffer me to doubt of its reality. Sir

Harry Wildair has completed many a rake ; and in the ‘ Suspicious Husband,’ Ranger, the humble imitator of Sir Harry, has had no slight influence in spreading that character. Of the fashionable women tinctured with the play-house morals, who would not be the sprightly, the witty, though dissolute Lady Townly, before the cold, the sober, though virtuous Lady Grace ? How odious ought those writers to be, who thus spread infection through their country ; employing the talents they have from their Maker most traitorously against him, by endeavouring to corrupt and disfigure his creatures ! If the comedies of Congreve did not rack him with remorse in his last moments, he must have been lost to all sense of virtue !”

The testimony of Cumberland, a writer of plays much more moral and decent than most of his contemporaries of the same profession, with regard to Congreve and the popular writers of that age, is very characteristic and conclusive.

“ Congreve, Farquhar, and some others, have made vice and villany so playful and amusing, that either they could not find in their hearts

to punish them ; or not caring how wicked they were, so long as they were witty, paid no attention to what became of them. Shadwell's Comedy is little better than a brothel."

I conclude the tedious work of quotation by the following extract from the legislative enactments of the Fathers of the American constitution, passed a short time after the declaration of independence, and the testimony of Dr. Channing, one of the most eloquent writers and preachers in the United States :—

"Whereas, true religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness, *Resolved*, That it be, and hereby is earnestly recommended to the several States to take the most effectual measures for the encouragement thereof, (*i. e.* of religion and morality,) and for the suppression of *theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, gaming*, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness and dissipation, and general depravity of principles and manners."

Speaking of the Theatre, Dr. Channing observes :—"How often is it disgraced by

monstrous distortions of human nature, and still more disgraced by profaneness, coarseness, indelicacy, and low wit, such as no woman, worthy of the name, can hear without a blush, and no man can take pleasure in without self-degradation. Is it possible that a Christian and a refined people can resort to Theatres, where exhibitions are given, fit only for brothels, and where the most licentious class in the community throng unconcealed to tempt and destroy? That the Theatre should be suffered to exist in its present degradation, is a reproach to the community."

It will perhaps be opposed to this list of authorities, that the objections I have quoted are levelled against the abuse of the Theatre, that they affect the comparatively ancient, and not the Drama of our own times; but I beg leave to remark, that these censures are strikingly applicable to Theatres as they have ever been managed, and to plays as they have generally been written. An immaculate Stage is one of the wonders of Utopia. But those who are so fond of pleading for the Theatre, under the notion of what it

may become, should not go thither ; I think I could venture to assure them that a blameless Stage would afford them no amusement.

The reputation of the Theatre has never been high among any who have had any regard for their own. The fathers of the Church, philosophers and divines, enlightened statesmen, and genuine patriots, have all concurred to consider the Stage as dangerous and destructive. One of the most strenuous writers in defence of the Theatre (I do not say the most convincing) I ever remember to have read, advises, notwithstanding, that the public should hold it with a "tight rein." It is bad indeed when an advocate, after exhausting so much rhetoric in behalf of a client, informs the court that he is not to be trusted ; and advises the judge to tie his hands to prevent his doing mischief. I think this gentleman has mistaken his object ; instead of vindicating, he has condemned the Theatre, and adds his suffrage to those distinguished characters already quoted ; among whom, no doubt, after mature consideration, he will be proud to enrol his name.

## CHAPTER VII.

### WHETHER THE STAGE IS IN A STATE OF MORAL IMPROVEMENT.

THE design of this chapter is to represent the futility of those arguments which would prolong the existence of a Theatre until it attain a degree of purity, which will effectually silence the objections of the religious fanatic, and the rigid moralist. Great stress has been laid on the advances which it has already made towards perfection. The comparative state of the Drama, in the reign of Charles the Second, and those of the Georges down to the present time, has been exultingly made. The difference in APPEARANCE is certainly great;\* but I am

\* And yet an authority quoted by Mr. Binney, and on which he implicitly relies, gives the following description of a modern playhouse. He begins with the interior (before the curtain.)

afraid that its principles and RADICAL state are precisely the same ; that they have been the same

“ An attractive view of this department is exhibited in the number of the Antijacobin Review for June 1800. ‘ The front boxes,’ says the reviewer, ‘ are almost exclusively devoted to women of the town ; the lobbies swarm with them ; they occupy every part of the house, with the solitary exception of the side boxes and the first circle ; the rooms intended for the purposes of refreshment, are like the show-rooms of a bagnio ; and it is next to impossible for a virtuous woman to walk from her box to her carriage, without having her eyes offended, and her ears shocked, by the most indecent gestures, and the most obscene language. And in this most profligate exhibition, the young men are as bad, if not worse than the women. At a summer theatre, we have seen the performance absolutely stopped by the noise of these male and female prostitutes, and the front boxes rendered the scene of actions fit only for a brothel !’

“ That this is a faithful, unexaggerated description of the frightful outrages upon common decency nightly witnessed within our English theatres, is too notorious to be denied. But what is still more horrible, they are not *permitted* only, they are absolutely *sanctioned* by the proprietors ; and the spacious and splendid saloons



in every age; and that no real improvement in this respect can reasonably be expected.

are fitted up in a style of eastern magnificence, for the express accommodation of the vicious and debauched alone: no virtuous female dare (nor was it intended that she should) even for an instant plant her foot within them."

\* \* \* \* \*

"In corroboration of the assertion that these abominations are *sanctioned* by the proprietors and managers of our theatres, I cite from the pages of the excellent author of fashionable amusements, the following awful fact:—

" 'The Theatre, in every age of its history,' he truly says, 'has been the resort of the licentious and profane. Some may attend this amusement for the purpose of intellectual gratification, to pronounce on the merits of the performers, or to dispose fashionably of an idle hour; but the majority, it is to be feared, is attracted by other and less harmless motives. As one evidence of the correctness of this statement, reference has been made to a *committee report* of one of the royal theatres, from which it appears, *that when a proposition was made to exclude females of a certain character from the house, in compliance with the wishes of many persons, who on account of such admissions*

It is essential to the existence of the Stage, that it should have charms to attract the gay

*were compelled to withdraw their sanction; THE MEASURE WAS OVERRULED, UNDER THE CONVICTION THAT, IF ADOPTED, THE INSTITUTION COULD NOT BE SUPPORTED !' "*

So much for the audience. As to the performers, the exhibitions on the stage, after the drawing up of the curtain, little need to be added. I must, however, introduce Mr. Binney's own testimony, in his opinion founded on the fairest reasoning, in order to corroborate my own.

"A Theatre cannot be commenced without capital, and without a company—it cannot be continued without varied performances and good receipts. Now, I mean to assert, that there is not in existence, in any language, or in all languages put together, a sufficient number of *perfectly unexceptionable stage-plays* to constitute such a stock for a company of virtuous performers, as would enable them to exclude all pieces of either corrupt or questionable character. I further assert, that if any company were to become so virtuous as to act nothing but what was intellectual and moral —‘ pure,’ ‘ lovely,’ and ‘ of good report’—if they were never to vary their grave lessons and innocent mirth, by the ‘ high seasoning’ (as it is termed in the green-

and the fashionable ; it must please ; not merely by gratifying a poetical taste, and by simple

room) of blaspheming and impurity, or by the high garnishing of buffoonery and folly ;—if they were to ‘ live to please ’ only man’s better nature, and by attempting thus to ‘ please ’ expected ‘ to live ’—they would presently find themselves woefully disappointed—they would soon have to play to empty benches, and be condemned to hunger and thirst in reality, as their reward for hungering and thirsting after the people’s righteousness.”\*

Mr. Sergeant Talfourd, in the Preface to the fourth edition of *Ion*, proclaims to his readers what he seems to hail as the moral regeneration of Covent-garden Theatre. Had Mr. Binney’s friend a prophetic reference to this fact, and its pecuniary result, when he asks ? “ Are you the manager of a Theatre ? then, to say nothing of religion, if you dare to inscribe on your proscenium ‘ Here morality is rigidly enforced,’ and act up to your motto, be assured your financial doom is sealed.” Mr. Macready begins to find it so, according to a recent statement in the *Monthly Chronicle*. Mr. Binney, if he take the trouble to make the reference, will perceive, that the quotation from Sir John Hawkins’s “ Life of Dr. Johnson,” was originally

\* Binney’s Sermon, “ The Theatre.”

dramatic composition, but by delineating character and manners. The character and manners it must delineate are those of the vicious and depraved ; or if it portray the virtues, it must confine its pictures to the showy and the splendid : and though it may “shoot” the follies of mankind, it must not cut the heart, nor touch the conscience.

This consideration of itself for ever confounds the expectations of those who would improve an established Theatre. It would be a hopeless project to construct a Stage solely to amuse poets and philosophers ; such a Stage could

inserted in this work. How solemn is the conviction of the evils inseparable from the establishment of a Theatre expressed in the following sentence :—

“ There is no part of theatrical economy with which I am unacquainted ; and it is my personal, complete knowledge of that economy which forces upon me the conviction, that, were another Ezekiel to arise, and another angel to descend, to exhibit to him the greater and greater abominations of this land, he would reserve for the astonished and indignant prophet a display of the iniquities of a London Theatre, as the last and most fearful chamber of imagery.’”

never be supported—there must be something to attract the multitude, and to obtain an audience sufficiently large to defray the expenses of a Theatre; something in fact suited to the general taste. The Theatre, to support itself in splendour, must be the creature of the public. And those who are acquainted with human nature need not to be told, that the strong hand of the legislature is absolutely necessary to preserve a popular amusement within the bounds of decency.

“It must be quite obvious for what purpose it is that society chooses to have a Theatre, and by what part of society it must be principally supported. A very few individuals may occasionally, or even habitually, attend it for the purpose of philosophical observation; but, even if these were sincerely anxious to apply the knowledge of human nature there acquired to the service of virtue and religion, which is rarely the case, the circumstance would be inexpressibly too trivial to be mentioned against the notorious fact, that the part of the community that require and frequent a Theatre, do it for no

purpose even the most distantly related to moral improvement. This would be testified, if it needed any testimony, by every one who has listened to the afternoon conversation of a party arranging and preparing to go to the play, and to the retrospective discussion of this party during the eleven o'clock breakfast of the following morning, or by any one who has listened to the remarks made around him in any part of the boxes, pit, or galleries. The persons who are intent on moral or intellectual improvement, will be found occupied in a very different manner, inspecting the works of the great historians, philosophers, moralists, or divines, or holding rational conversations with their families or friends; or even (if they judge instruction really is to be obtained from that source) reading the most celebrated dramatic works in their own or another language, and with a far more judicious and scrutinizing attention than any one exerts amidst the thousand interfering and beguiling circumstances of the Theatre. Now, if amusement is the grand object sought at the Playhouse, the

object in copiously ministering to which its existence wholly depends ; it must, to preserve that existence, adapt itself completely to the taste of that part of society that is most devoted to amusement, and will pay its price in time, health, and money, And what sort of persons are they that compose this part of society ? Is it not superfluous to say, that they are *necessarily* the trifling and immoral ? They are such of the wealthy as have neither occupation nor benevolence : the devotees of fashion ; the most thoughtless part of the young, together with what are called young men of spirit, who want a little brisk folly as an interlude to their more vicious pursuits ; loungers of all sorts ; tradesmen who neglect their business ; persons who in domestic relations have no notion of cultivating the highest social and intellectual interests ; and old debauchees, together with the wretched class of beings, whose numbers, vices, and miseries they can still be proud to augment. It is by this part of the community, composed of these classes, that the Theatre is mainly supported ? and these it

must gratify, or it will perish. And if it must gratify this part of the community, of what moral qualities must its exhibitions be? Is it not fully settled in the minds of all classes of its frequenters, that it is a place of perfect inanity from grave thought and converse with conscience, and from all puritanism, cant, sermonizing, saintship, godliness, sober representations of life and duty, and squeamish modesty, excepting so far as some of all of these may be introduced for ridicule; in which mode of introduction, indeed, they are probably greater favourites with an English theatrical audience than all other subjects? In short, are not the entertainments of the Theatre resorted to, and delighted in, as something confessedly, avowedly, and systematically opposite, to what is understood by its frequenters have formed the chief concern, the prominent and unpopular distinction, of the most devout and holmen, of dying penitents, of Christian apostles, of all the persons most deeply solicitous for the glory of God and the salvation of souls? It has been forcibly shown that, with certain



fluctuations and some degree of modern amendment in the article of decorum, this has always been the character of the Stage, and is the character of the great body of our written Drama. And why has this been uniformly the character? Are we to believe that the writers and actors, with an unparalleled contempt of self-interest, have been for several hundred years forcing on their grand and sole patron, the public, a species of dramatic exhibitions disapproved by that patron? On the contrary, these writers and players have always been to the full as sagacious, with respect to their own interest, as any other class of persons, who are to prosper or famish, according to the acceptance or disapproval of what they furnish to the public market; and quite as obsequious in accommodating to the public taste.

“It is impossible for the Stage to become good, in a Christian sense, because its character must be faithfully congenial with that of its supporters; and they chiefly consist of the most trifling, irreligious, and immoral part of the community. But perhaps it may be

thought, if the Stage, by a resolute effort of its directors, were quite to change its character, and become the mirror of Christian sentiments and morals, it might obtain a better class of supporters, and thus afford to lose the frivolous and the dissolute. And if this were possible, is it desirable? We are not convinced it would be any great advantage gained to the happiness of society, if we were to see the great temple of wisdom and virtue in Covent Garden, lined with an auditory of right reverend bishops, zealous ministers, and the worthiest part of their flocks, drest in sober faces and decent apparel, rank above rank, up to the region of what used to be called 'The Gods;' if we were to see the pit occupied by a battalion of Quakers; if worthy domestic men, who have been accustomed to pass their evenings in reading with their wives and sisters, after half an hour's sport with their children, were to commence the practice of either sliding off alone, or taking their families along with them, to the new rendezvous of saints and philosophers; or if virtuous young men, quali-

fyng, by diligent study, for important professions, and young women, qualifying for their wives, were seen flocking to the dramatic oracle, to inquire how to combine wisdom and love. But if all this were ever so much a 'consummation devoutly to be wished,' it would never be attained; and the mansion of the christened Apollo might be surrendered to the bats, unless he would forswear his newly-adopted and unprofitable faith, and again invite the profane and profligate. The orderly, industrious, studious, benevolent, and devout, would never, in any state of the Theatre, frequent it in sufficient numbers to defray the cost of dresses and wax candles. And besides, what becomes, during this hopeful experiment, of that worse part of the community, which the Stage was to have helped the Gospel to reform? They are the while wandering away, perverse and hapless beings! from the most precious school ever opened for the corrective discipline of sinners. But the place, originally intended to please them, will not long be occupied by the usurping morality that would

assume to mend them. Like the unclean spirit, they will soon re-enter the swept and garnished house, and even, like him, bring auxiliary companions, the more effectually to assert *whose* house it is."

The principles, the pleasures, the conduct of mankind, must be changed before the Stage can be morally improved. It is a truth which requires little reasoning to establish it, that the Theatre which derives its existence from the will of society, must always remain what that society chooses to make it. Depravity and vice, which are now the general features of the world, must yield to purity and virtue before we can expect the transformation of the Stage. The Theatre is the immoral creature of an immoral audience :

" The Drama's laws, the Drama's patrons give,  
And those who live to please, must please to live."

It is the prerogative of a system entirely Divine to effect the moral revolution of mankind ; no human contrivance, no worldly institution, will ever produce it.

It may be confidently asked, What are the data on which the theatrical visionary builds his conclusion, that that which has been the bane, will one day become the blessing of the world? As well may we expect all noxious things to change their nature: the thorn may as suddenly arise to the towering fir, and the thistle become a vine. To be consistent with themselves, those who tell us that the Theatre is on the march of improvement, should adopt the ridiculous theory of the perfectibility of man, and believe that we carry in our depraved heart and fragile body the seeds of future renovation and of immortal vigour.

The natural tendency of all evil things is from bad to worse; the intervention of circumstances may impede the progress of depravity—may preserve it stationary for a time; ingenious sophistry, and artful refinement, may cover it with a veil to conceal its deformity, but they can never change its nature. It is readily conceded, as I have more than once remarked, that evil is not essential to mere dramatic representation, but it is essential to a

Theatre ; and never did a Theatre exist which did not gratify the pride, the passion, and the folly of the human heart. Here the advocates of the Stage and its opponents are at issue ; and it devolves on the former to disprove what has been urged against it, on the ground that it cannot, in a moral point of view, be **ESSENTIALLY** reformed.

The Theatre is a mirror, in which are reflected the vices and follies of mankind ; its legitimate object is to “ show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure ;” and of course its improvement can never be greater than the moral improvement of the world. The boasted superiority of the Drama of the present above any former age, will be little credited by an impartial person, who will take the pains of comparing modern theatrical productions with those of the most licentious period in the days that are past.

Let us hear no more then of the moral improvement of the Stage ; its character is indelibly marked, and a review of its favourite productions is as dishonourable to the present, as

the plays of that period were disgraceful to the age of Charles the Second : the principles are the same ; the change is only in modification. In the former, morals were openly attacked ; in the latter they are artfully undermined : but their destruction is equally the object of both. In confirmation of this sentiment, it is not a little flattering to be able again to boast of the celebrated Miss Baillie as an auxiliary . “ At the beginning of its career,” she remarks, “ the Drama was employed to mislead and excite ; and were I not unwilling to refer to transactions of the present times, I might abundantly confirm what I have said by recent examples.”

My opinion is (and it is the result of long observation and serious inquiry) that the character of the Theatre is strongly marked, and marked with almost every variety of evil ; and that therefore, in proportion as it is adapted to the intellectual character of man, and as it is calculated to interest his passions and to make a deep impression on his heart, it is a dangerous enemy to his virtue and happiness. As

the Stage has had its able, eminent, and successive advocates, I have carefully examined every plea, and weighed in the balance of reason every argument that has been urged in its favour; endeavouring, at the same time, to treat the gentlemen to whom I am opposed, with that respectful decorum which becomes a Christian; a conduct which, I hope, they will learn to imitate. Misrepresentation and invective, in which they have hitherto so liberally indulged, will not advance their cause, and may induce a suspicion that they are irritated by a mortified consciousness of defeat.

That I may narrow the ground of argument as much as possible, as well as impart a clear distinctness to the object which I have had in view, I would observe, that dramatic compositions, as such, and considered without reference to their actual performance, are no otherwise liable to censure than as they convey licentious and immoral sentiments. I am perfectly willing to allow, what indeed it would be the greatest arrogance to deny, after so much has been said by the ablest critics, "That a well-



written tragedy is perhaps one of the noblest efforts of the human mind." I think, with Mrs. More, "That there is a substantial difference between seeing and reading a dramatic performance; and that the objections which lie so strongly against the one, are not, at least in the same degree, applicable to the other; or, rather, while there is an essential and inseparable danger attendant on dramatic exhibitions, let the matter of the drama be ever so innocent, the danger in reading a play arises solely from the improper sentiments contained in it." In her admirable preface to her tragedies, this most distinguished of our female writers has very ingeniously and forcibly stated this distinction between written and exhibited plays; and as one design of the present work has been to display *authorities* in favour of the opinions it may have advanced, I shall make no apology for the following quotation; its excellence will atone for its length:—"To read a moral play is little different from reading any other innocent poem; the dialogue form being a mere accident, and no way affecting

the moral tendency of the piece ; nay, some excellent poets have chosen that form on account of its peculiar advantages, even when the nature of their subjects precluded the idea of theatrical exhibition. Thus Buchanan wrote his fine tragedies of *The Baptist* and *Jephthah* ; Grotius that of *Christ Suffering* ; and Milton that of *Samson Agonistes* ; not to name the *Joseph*, the *Bethulia Delivered*, and some other pieces of the amiable Metastasio. Nothing, therefore, could be more unreasonable than to proscribe from the study or the closet well-selected dramatic poetry. It may be read with safety, because it can there be read with soberness. The most animated speeches subside into comparative tameness ; and, provided they are perfectly pure, produce no ruffle of the passions, no agitation of the senses, but merely afford a pleasant, and it may be a not unsalutary exercise to the imagination.

“ In all the different kinds of poetry, there will be a necessity for selection ; and where could safer poetical amusement be found than in the works of Racine, whose *Athalia*, in par-

ticular, most happily illustrates an interesting piece of Scripture history ; at the same time that, considered as a composition, it is itself a model of poetical perfection. I may mention, as an exquisite piece, the Masque of Comus ; and, as interesting poems in the dramatic form, also the Caractacus and Elfrida of Mason ; the passing over which pieces in the volumes of that virtuous poet, merely because they are in a dramatic form, would be an instance of scrupulosity which one might venture to say no well-informed conscience could suggest. Let neither, then, the devout and scrupulous, on the one hand, nor the captious caviller, on the other, object to this distinction : I mean between *reading* a dramatic composition, and *seeing* a theatrical exhibition, as if it were fanciful or arbitrary. In the latter, is it the mere repetition of the speeches which implies danger ? Is it this which attracts the audience ? No : were even the best reader, if he did not bring in aid the novelty of a foreign language, to read the whole play himself without scenic decorations, without dress, without gesticula-

tion, would such an exhibition be numerously, or for any length of time, attended? What, then, chiefly draws the multitude? It is the semblance of real action, which is given to the piece by different persons supporting the different parts, and by their dress, their tones, their gestures, heightening the representation into a kind of enchantment. It is the concomitant pageantry, it is the splendour of the spectacle, and even the show of the spectators; these are the circumstances which altogether fill the Theatre—which altogether produce the effect—which altogether create the danger; these give a pernicious force to sentiments which, when read, merely explain the mysterious action of the human heart; but which, when thus uttered, thus accompanied, become contagious and destructive.”\*

\* I cannot help subjoining, in a note, the judicious remarks on Shakspeare, with which the preface is enriched, from which the above extract is made:—“In company with a judicious friend or parent, many scenes of Shakspeare may be read, not only without danger, but with improvement. Far be it from me to

Before I conclude, I would likewise remark, that the question of legislative interference to

wish to abridge the innocent delights of life, where they may be enjoyed with benefit to the understanding, and without injury to the principles. Women, especially, whose walk in life is so circumscribed, and whose avenues of information are so few, may, I conceive, learn to know the world with less danger, and to study human nature with more advantage from the *perusal* of selected parts of this incomparable genius, than from most other attainable sources. I would, in this view, consider Shakspeare as a philosopher as well as poet; and I have been surprised to hear many pious people universally confound and reprobate this poet with the common herd of dramatists and novelists. To his acute and sagacious mind, every varied position of the human heart, every shade of discrimination in the human character, all the minute delicacies, all the exquisite touches, all the distinct affections, all the contending interests, all the complicated passions of the heart of man seem, as far as is allowed to human inspection to discern them, to be laid open. Though destitute himself of the aids of literature and of the polish of society, he seems to have possessed, by intuition, all the advantages that various reading and elegant society can bestow, and to

abolish the Theatre has been purposely kept out of view. The pages of this work are not

have combined the warmest energies of passion and the boldest strokes of imagination, with the justest properties of reasoning and the exactest niceties of conduct. He makes every description a picture, and every sentiment an axiom. He seems to have known how every being which did exist would speak and act, under every supposed circumstance, and every possible situation; and how every being, which did *not* exist, must speak and act, if ever he were to be called into actual existence.

“From the discriminated, the guarded, the qualified perusal of such an author, it will be impossible, nor does it appear to be necessary, to debar accomplished and elegantly educated young persons. Let not the above eulogium be censured as too strong or too bold. In almost every library they will find his writings; in almost every work of taste and criticism the young reader will not fail to meet with the panegyric of Shakspeare. The frequent allusions to him, and the beautiful quotations from him, will, if they light upon a corresponding taste, inflame it with a curiosity to peruse all his works. Now, would it not be safer to anticipate the danger which might result from a private and unqualified perusal, for the parent to select such

addressed to the Legislature, but to the Public. The Stage does not owe its importance to the

pieces as have in them the fewest of those corruptions, which truth must allow that Shakspeare possesses, in common with other dramatic poets? For who will deny that all the excellences we have ascribed to him, are debased by passages of offensive grossness?—are tarnished with indelicacy, false taste, and vulgarity? Let me, however, be permitted to observe, that though Shakspeare often disgusts by single passages and expressions, (which I will not vindicate by ascribing them to the false taste of the age in which he wrote; for, though that may extenuate the fault of the poet, it does not diminish the danger of the reader;) yet, perhaps, the general tendency of his pieces is less corrupt than that of the pieces of almost any dramatist; and the reader rises from the perusal of Shakspeare, without those distinct images of evil in his mind, without having his heart so dissolved by amatory scenes, or his mind so warped by corrupt reasoning, or his heart so inflamed with seducing principles, as he will have experienced from other writers of the same description, however exempt *their* works may be from the more broad and censurable vices of composition which disfigure many parts of Shakspeare. Lest I be misrepresented, let it be observed, that I am now distinguish-

sanction of the Government, but to the patronage of the People. Let a Christian Public

ing the general *result* arising from the tendency of his pieces, from the effect of particular passages ; and this is the reason why a discriminated perusal is so important. For, after all, the *general disposition of mind* with which we rise from the reading of a work, is the best criterion of its utility or mischief. To the tragedies of Shakspeare, too, belongs this superiority, that his pieces being faithful histories of the human heart, and portraits of the human character, love is only introduced as one passion, among many which enslave mankind ; whereas, by most other play-writers, it is treated as the monopolizing tyrant of the heart.

“ It is not because I consider Shakspeare as a correct moralist and an unerring guide, that I suggest the advantage of having the youthful curiosity allayed by a partial perusal, and under prudent inspection ; but it is for this very different reason, lest by having that curiosity stimulated by the incessant commendation of this author, with which both books and conversation abound, young persons should be excited to devour in secret an author, who, if devoured in the gross, will not fail, by many detached passages, to put a delicate reader in the situation of his own ancient Pistol, when



refuse to support anti-christian amusements, and they will die of themselves. If the Stage had no existence among us, and if the propriety of establishing it came under consideration, I certainly think that the Legislature, in such a case, ought imperatively and promptly to decide against it; and I am even now inclined to believe with Augustine:—"Si tantummodo boni et honesti homines in civitate essent, nec in rebus humanis ludi scenici esse debuissent;" and, had I made it any part of my design in this Essay, to enter into the discussion which I deem it expedient to waive, I should address our rulers in the language of another father, Chrysostom:—"Imò, vero, his Theatralibus ludis eversis, non leges, sed iniquitatem evertetis, ac omnem civitatis pestem extinguetis." However rooted this evil, with many others, may be in the constitution of society, the period, I trust, will arrive, when

eating the leek; that is, to swallow and execrate at the same time."—*Works of Hannah More, Vol. III. p. 44 of Preface.*

not only our swords shall be beaten into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning-hooks, but when our Theatres shall be converted into the lecture-rooms of the philosopher, the depositories of the artist, and the libraries of the public.

## CONCLUSION.

Thus, in almost every view in which we can contemplate the Stage, we are struck with its injurious and baneful tendency. Those who defend it as a school of morals can never have seriously examined its character, or traced its influence. It will excite surprise that any man, who professes to be acquainted with theatrical productions, should gravely commend them in the following strain:—"True Tragedy is a **SERIOUS LECTURE UPON OUR DUTY**, shorter than an epic poem, and longer than a fable; otherwise differing from both only in method, which is dialogue instead of narration. Its province is to bring us in love with the more exalted virtues, and to create a detestation of the blacker and (humanly speaking) more enormous crimes. In Comedy, an insinuating mirth laughs us out of our frailties, by making

us ashamed of them. Thus, when they are well intended, Tragedy and Comedy work to one purpose : the one manages us as children, the other convinces us as men.”\* How finely

\* How much depends on the manner of stating a subject ; let us hear the sentiments of Rousseau respecting Tragedy and Comedy :—

“ The Stage, it is said, if directed as it may and ought to be, would serve to render virtue amiable and vice odious. Well, and what then ! Were not honest men respected, and knaves detested, before there were any comedies ? Are they less so in places where there are no theatrical entertainments ? The Stage serves to render virtue amiable ;—a great matter, truly, to effect what nature and reason had done before ! Bad men are rendered odious on the Stage ; pray are they less so in society, when they are known to be such ? Is it very certain that this odium is to be imputed to the art of the writer, rather than to the actions of which he represents them guilty ? Is it very certain that the simple relation of those crimes would fill us with less indignation than arises from all the glowing colours in which he has described them ? If all his art consists in exhibiting malefactors, in order to render them hateful to us, I see nothing so very admirable in such art : and we have of these too many examples

who proclaim, that they only, among the children of men, are the persons who can trifle with sin without receiving the least immoral taint? We have heard of a power to charm the adder, but these individuals have found a drug which will captivate the "old serpent" himself and render him harmless. However I doubt their pretensions, I am ready to question that man's virtue who can encourage, by his presence and example, indecent ribaldry, profane swearing, and mock devotion. This is indeed a sort of monstrous virtue, which a man may make a show of; and I know of no place so fit for its exhibition as the Theatre. I would say to these very virtuous persons—though you can rush into the fire, and escape the injury of the flame, yet remember, all are not so invulnerable as you; and it is the duty of a virtuous mind to study the good of others. Perhaps the very night of your attendance may be marked in the history of some deluded young person, as the dreadful era from whence he has to date his everlasting ruin. And, oh! horrid to think, you contributed, by your example and your

money, to keep open the gates of hell, which, when they close, are to close upon him for ever ! The second class, namely, those who are so depraved, so versed in the science of iniquity, that they have nothing to learn from the Stage, are persons with whom I have nothing to do :—they are perhaps incorrigible ; and a book on the immorality of the Stage they will never peruse. Those who have no more virtue than their neighbours, who, in an evil hour, may be ensnared by vice, or deluded by temptation, will surely be warned of the danger which lurks in every avenue to a Theatre, and which is enthroned on its boards ; to them it will be painful to receive impressions which strongly fortify the heart against the Gospel of our salvation :—and no man, who is not bereft of reason, will court amusement at the expense of purity of conscience, and the rectitude of virtue.

It has often struck me when meditating on this subject, that could we banish from the Theatre the illusion with which its scenery, the dress and language of the performers captivate

the mind, we should lose all temptation to visit it for amusement.

The apparatus for a Stage is thus humourously described by Rousseau.\* “Imagine to yourself the inside of a large box, about fifteen feet wide, and long in proportion. This box is the Stage; on each side are placed screens at different distances, on which the objects of the scene are coarsely painted. Beyond this is a great curtain, daubed in the same manner, which extends from one side to the other, and is generally cut through to represent caves in the earth, and openings in the heavens, as the

\* The machinery is changed since the days of Rousseau. Perhaps, there is no illusion so complete as that which modern art has brought to such perfection in the scenic representation of the Stage. Still it is no more than mimicry. The thunder and lightning, and the apparatus for supernatural appearances, are great improvements on the clumsy expedients of a former age; but as compared with the awful originals they are intended to exhibit, what are they more than a cracker at the end of a squib, a trap door over a cellar, which presents to him the infernal regions? an idea as profane as it is ridiculous.

perspective requires ; so that if any person, in walking behind the scenes, should happen to brush against the curtain, he might cause an earthquake so violent as to shake—our sides with laughing. The skies are represented by a parcel of bluish rags, hung up with lines and poles, like wet linen at the washerwoman's. The sun, for he is represented here sometimes, is a large candle in a lantern. A troubled sea is made of long rollers, covered with canvas or blue paper, laid parallel, and turned by the dirty understrappers of the Theatre. Their thunder is a heavy cart which rumbles over the floor. The flashes of lightning are made by throwing powdered resin into the flame of a link : and the falling thunderbolt is a cracker at the end of a squib. The Stage is provided with little square trap-doors, which, opening on occasion, give notice that ghosts and devils are coming out of the cellar."

With respect to theatrical exhibitions themselves I can easily conceive, if an individual could be found whose reason is unbiassed, and whose mind is stored with every kind of know-



ledge, but that which is derived from poets and the gay world ; if such an one were told that a number of men and women were maintained for no other purpose than to pretend to make love to, and to pretend to kill one another on a stage prepared for the purpose ; that their business was to hold dialogues under fictitious characters, and to feign the most extravagant passions that ever agitated the human breast, in scenes of the deepest interest ; and if he were further told, that multitudes of rational beings would sit hours together to be amused by all this folly ; I can easily conceive, I say, that he would be, beyond measure, astonished. “ Can the persons of whom you speak (he would reply) be dignified with the godlike power of reason ? I know not, for my part, which most to pity, the poor creatures who are condemned to play the ape for so many hours, or the contemptible beings who voluntarily consent so long to play the fool.”

That Christians ought to abhor the Stage, when they consider it as a **TEACHER** ; and that they ought to despise it as an **AMUSEMENT**,

degrading to the character and as injurious to the pursuits of immortal beings, will be at once acknowledged. They are obliged to do more than others. If the subject were doubtful—were it a matter of question only, whether the Theatre were lawful to Christians or not, the disciple of Jesus is bound to take the safest side, to avoid the appearance of evil, and to live to the glory of his God. Besides, it is not necessary for *him* to seek enjoyment abroad in any of the distinguishing vanities of the world. The nearer he approximates to the Deity, terrestrial objects lose their glory and their charms. His amusements are the pleasures of religion :—he has what the Scriptures call “ a new heart ;” a heart whose affections centre in the All-sufficient Good ;—it is formed for celestial joys, and it aspires after the entertainments of angels. This is its ardent language :—

“ My wishes, hopes, my pleasures, and my love,  
My thoughts, and noblest passions are above.”

It is with you then, reader, to determine,

whether you will renounce Christianity, or the Theatre. Fear not the world, nor its "dread laugh," but choose that wisdom, whose ways are pleasantness, and all whose paths are peace.

THE END.





